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**THE WORLD'S LEAST
INTERESTING MASTER
SWORDSMAN**



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Prologue — Name

Lady Douve Sepaeda is my employer and the daughter of House Sepaeda, one of the Four Great Houses of the Arcana Kingdom. After realizing her marriage prospects were beginning to dim, Lady Douve had the fortune to run into Magyan Tahlan, prince of a distant kingdom.

Magyan Tahlan earnestly wishes for me, Sansui Shirokuro, to accept him as my apprentice. I decline on the grounds that I'm not yet considered fully trained by my Master, but rather than giving up, he next asks for an audience with my Master. A few other people mentioned their desire to meet him, so I will be leading them to the woods where my Master resides. However, there's something I need to take care of before we set out.

With Lady Douve and Blois standing witness, I have a few things to explain to my daughter, Lain.

"Lain, you're a bright girl. I'm sure you've long suspected it...but you and I aren't related by blood."

It's something that's long been the subject of gossip by House Sepaeda's household servants, and Lain herself is bright and perceptive. I'm sure she's already aware that families are ordinarily connected by blood.

What happened before I joined House Sepaeda... Why I'm raising Lain, a girl with whom I've no blood relation... These are things I need to explain to her.

"...Yup."

"Even then, I've raised you like you were my own child, and I've tried to give you the best life I could. I think you're aware of that, too."

"Yup. Papa is Papa."

If one of Lain's parents were to show up tomorrow, I think neither of them would have any room for complaint about the life Lain's led so far. I think she's grown to be a child who anyone would be proud of, and she behaves like a model young lady. I couldn't have prepared a better environment for her to grow up in, and I doubt anyone else could have done better. That's one thing for which I owe House Sepaeda quite a lot.

"I think no one bothered to ask until now, because it was obvious we weren't actually related...but let me tell you how I came to be your father."

It's clear that Lain isn't my biological child, whether on the basis of my apparent age or by the simple observation that we're clearly of different ethnicities.

Which is why no one at House Sepaeda asked me for details. Honestly, I wonder what they really thought about it. The fact that they didn't pry...that's something I certainly appreciate.

It may have been a consequence of their high opinion of me, based on my strength, my lack of ambition, and my loyalty.

That there were no incidents of missing children within the Arcana Kingdom might also have helped, too.

“...Okay.”

“I had been training with my Master in a forest within the Arcana Kingdom’s current borders, from before the kingdom itself existed all the way up until five years ago.”

Yes, five years ago. It’s been five years since I joined mortal society. Both Lady Douve and Blois show interest in my autobiography.

“Five years ago, as my Master and I were training in the woods, we felt the presence of another human being for the first time in five hundred years. It was you...and another woman.”

Lain seems to be bracing herself for something, but I don’t have enough details to hold back any shocking revelations.

“My Master and I thought that she was a lost traveler and made our way to that presence, but...she had already been attacked by a pack of wolves. By the time we arrived, the woman who had been carrying you had already died of her wounds.”

I refrain from mentioning that, at the time, I felt a little bad for the wolves and that I’d interrupted their meal. In all seriousness, my Master and I had both felt rather uneasy about leaving the wolves hungry, but there was no need to talk about that here.

“I don’t know if that woman was your mother or your nursemaid. All I know is that she died to protect you.”

“...”

“If you’d had the talent to become an Immortal, we might have raised you in those woods, but you didn’t have an Immortal Aura. That is why my Master instructed me to raise you among other mortals.”

“...So, Papa, that means...”

“Yes. I didn’t know anything about you. I decided to become your father to carry on the wishes of the woman who had wandered into the woods, then died to protect you.”

I see Lady Douve and Blois nodding in understanding. It seems the two of them already expected the story to be something along those lines.

“Even if you wanted to learn about your past, I’m afraid that I couldn’t tell you anything you might want to know. I’m sorry...”

I adopted a child I’d found. There was no other reason or connection behind it. Well aware of my lack of desire and ambition, the three of them don’t see any reason to doubt my account. Which squares with them never asking me anything in the past.

“Um...”

“What is it?”

“Well, what about my name? Why is my name Lain?”

“...”

“Papa, why are you looking away?”

Blois and Lady Douve also look faintly irritated.



"Lain...you're my daughter. I'm the one who named you."

"Gotcha. So why did you name me Lain?"

Seems my daughter just wants to know where her name comes from.

"Miss Blois's name means 'creator of wind.' And Lady Douve is named for a great person from history, she said..."

"I see. My name...it means 'plentiful nature.'"

My Master's name apparently means 'ink-brush drawing.'

"And what does my name mean? When did you name me?"

"It means 'the rain'... I named you right before introducing you to House Sepaeda."

"And why did you name me after the rain? Was it raining that day?"

"It wasn't raining the day we met, Sansui. Isn't that right, Blois?"

"Yes, I recall that it was a beautiful cloudless day."

I feel intense scrutiny behind the gaze Lady Douve and Blois direct my way. I guess they're of an age where these things are important. I can't help but reflect a bit on my serenity, or, more precisely, my lack of interest in the finer details or exact reasons.

"...Well, after five hundred years in those woods, I didn't have a good sense of the mortal world. I'd never met anyone other than my Master, and, well, I had a greater tendency toward a certain obliviousness than I do now."

"And?"

"I couldn't think of any nouns other than nature related words."

Lain is really clearly upset. But I couldn't help that. After five centuries of doing practice swings, you start losing sight of other human sensibilities like names... To have to name a girl under those circumstances, well... I mean, that's asking for the impossible.

"I thought it would be better than a variation of Forest, Stone, Cloud, Wolf, Rabbit, Leaf, or Wood..."

"...Did you think it through?"

"No, it's just what came to mind."

"Papa, I hate you!"

What do I do? There's really not any room for further understanding here. I mean, I wasn't really thinking about a name when I found her, and I named her because I wanted to make sure I could answer the question if asked. And I went through with it quickly because I didn't want them thinking I was a kidnapper.

Which means, dear daughter of mine, that I had no time to think. Although, it's an open question as to whether or not I would have thought more carefully if I'd had the time.

"I'm an idiot, sure. But I swear I've raised you like I would my own flesh and blood. You're my daughter. That's the truth."

"Now's not the time!" Lain says tearfully. Seems she's realized I named her without putting much thought behind the name.

Yes, that's my daughter. Sharp!

"I figured that it would be something like that. You really are dull."

"...Frankly, I have to admit that even I'm taken aback by that one, Sansui."

Thinking about it, I think this is the first time I've earned the ire of all three of them at once.

Names are really important, actually. I mean, my name being really old-fashioned was how I wound up dead, after all.

"Uh, so why don't we say this is your childhood name and rechristen you when you're grown up?"

"So you've been calling me by some random name all this time!"

"...House Sepaeda provided a nursemaid and a tutor, but I still like to think I've been able to act like your father all this time."

"That has nothing to do with giving me a random, throwaway name, does it?"

Still, in spite of us not being related by blood, that we can have this sort of father-daughter like argument is evidence we're a proper family in spite of it all.

That she had a sense I'd named her without a lot of deep thought, well, that's a sign that we understand one another really well.

"Papa! You're thinking up some excuse to defend yourself in your head, aren't you!"

Ah ha. Despite not being an Immortal, she can read what's in my heart. That's my daughter!

Chapter 1 — The True Strength to Aspire To...

Part 1 — Chance Meeting

“Oh? Whether to make Tahlan your apprentice or your Master’s apprentice? Do as you wish. We’ll leave that to you and your Master.”

“We’re well aware of why you stay with us. We have no desire to force you to do anything against your will. The only thing that keeps you here, given your lack of ambition and desires, is your trust in us. We will do what we can to avoid doing things that go against your wishes.”

“You’re our House’s sword. As long as you remain that, we will protect you.”

“Tahlan will live in Douve’s estate and eventually marry her?!?!
PREPARE FOR WAAAAAAAAAAAR!”

And that was how we got permission for Tahlan to become an apprentice.

This is why the House Sepaeda and House Batterabbe parties are now heading to the woods my Master calls home via carriage.

“This area is covered by old growth forests because no one considers it worth developing.”

“There are evidently quite a few places like this in the kingdom, but I didn’t expect someone like your Master to live in such a place.”

Happine and Lady Douve are chatting inside the carriage as it clatters along. We departed the morning after His Brothership and His Fathership gave permission, and now we’re approaching the woods a little around sunset.

The woods themselves cover a substantial area, but the edge of that area isn’t that far away from the Academy.

“Hey, Papa. Is this around the place where I met you, Papa?”

“Yep, that’s right.”

We proceed along a pastoral, idyllic little road. Due to the distance between here and the border with the neighboring country of Domino, there’s no sign of the approaching war. By way of contrast, Eckesachs makes no effort to hide her hostility.

“Eckesachs...”

“...Worry not. You are my wielder. There’s no possibility of me switching...an odd notion, that, a sword changing masters.”

Even if he’s the Master I admire, to her he’s the man who abandoned her. She has her own feelings on the matter. I mean, thinking about it, it’s a pretty awful story. She’s the strength my Master threw away, while I’m the successor to the strength my Master cultivated after abandoning her. No wonder she doesn’t like me. And, really, my Master could have been a little more considerate about this. I think he could have spared her a bit more thought, particularly considering they’re both going to be around for a long, long time.

"I myself witnessed the strength he acquired by abandoning me. I'm not so shameless as to demand you challenge the impossible. If his apprentice is this strong, I can't imagine how powerful Suiboku is now...."

Yeah, that's understandable. I mean, she had her chosen swordsman beaten by an unarmed opponent. I really do feel bad for her.

"He really has become stronger, hasn't he..."

"A swordsman who has reached such a height with his craft that he'd even surrender a Sacred Sword...how I look forward to the meeting."

Unlike Eckesachs, Tahlan is looking forward to his meeting. In terms of sheer swordsmanship, my Master is definitely ahead of me. But he's not simply a superior version of me. I doubt they'll end up fighting, but no doubt he'll be shocked by Master Suiboku's power.

Separate from these two is someone who fidgets nervously, as though she's going to meet her future father-in-law. That, of course, is Blois.

"Um...will your Master dislike a woman who dresses like a man?"

"It's fine. He doesn't care."

"Oh, that's right...well then, how about a smelly woman...? I did put on some perfume, but perhaps I still smell of sweat...?"

"Not to worry. He lives in the woods."

"Should I have brought some sort of gift?"

"No need. He has no appetite, nor any desire for material possessions."

She's nervous about these things, but it's fine. He lives surrounded by more animals than your average farmer or rancher, so he doesn't really mind any of it. If anything, he's the sort who'd mind being handed things. He's far beyond just a mere ascetic.

"Do you remember when we first met? Back when I first came out of the woods? He's like that."

"Oh...in that case, if anything, it makes things trickier..."

"There's no need to be so tense. My Master is even further removed from the mortal world than I am. If you say you want to marry me, I think he'd just be happy about it."

"D-don't say that in front of everyone!"

Thanks to Tahlan's appearance, the possibility that Lady Douve would end up marrying me has been greatly reduced. If anything, if she lets Tahlan go, she may very well be out of options. She's someone who can't compromise, and he's set the bar far too high.

"Sansui. You mentioned you won't enter the woods yourself, so how are we to find your Master?"

Lady Douve, who would definitely prefer if I were to lead the way, asks the obvious. There aren't any roads in the woods, so there definitely needs to be some sort of guide. But, again, there's no need for concern.

"If you enter the woods, I think my Master will come to you."

"Alright... Honestly, there's no reason for me to go see him, but I'm curious. I suppose it's the mystery of it all."

The carriage stops near a trail by the woods. Filled with their own kinds of excitement and anxiety, they make their way into the deep woods. The driver and I wait by the carriage and watch them leave. The driver evidently seems to think I should go with the others, and looks over at me for confirmation.

"Are you certain you needn't visit your Master?"

"Yes, it's fine. My Master wouldn't be pleased to see me."

I haven't finished raising Lain, and thus I haven't fulfilled my promise yet.

"Master Sansui... Do you think your Master will approve of the apprenticeship?"

"I do not know. However...he'll choose an outcome that's best for everyone."

"I see. If you say so..."

The woods were deep. It was an old growth forest, one which human hands hadn't touched in ages. There wasn't even so much as a path in sight. While the deep woods stimulated their sense of adventure, the party was also being 'welcomed' by the woods.

"This scent...it's an overwhelming smell of greenery..."

"...The bugs...the bugs..."

"My shoes are already covered with mud."

"Complaining already? Merely about these woods? I doubt women so soft could bear strong children and raise them. Don't you agree, Saiga? You prefer a strong woman like me, yes?"

Out of the women in the party, only Sunae seems unruffled by the wilderness. However, Saiga himself was in no position to answer, either.

The chokingly dense smell of greenery, the sting of thorns growing on stalks and roots, the lack of solid footing... By stepping foot inside the woods, it becomes immediately apparent that the forest is a different world unto itself. It's enough to make one realize why, despite being in the Royal Lands, these woods have stayed untouched.

"Well, I now realize why he was so dirty when we first met him..."

"It appears that, if anything, he was on the clean side..."

"Eww, smelly..."

Most of the party, the members of House Sepaeda included, had dressed in long sleeves and shoes suited for the woods, but all those preparations couldn't do anything about the mud.

While all of them had a change of clothes ready inside the carriage, it didn't change that they would remain covered in grime until they could return to the carriage.

"Say, Douve. What are we going to do if Sansui's Master isn't here? It's been five years, right? If we keep going, we might get lost..."

"If it comes to that, I'll just yell out for Sansui. Really, though, I wouldn't need to. Sansui would come running if he felt that I was in trouble."

The ability to detect the presence of others... It's such a vital part of being an Immortal that there's no formal name for the ability. It's an ability that allows an Immortal to gather information from their surroundings like a radar, rather than be restricted by senses like sight.

The ability means that, even if Douve is a fair distance away, Sansui can still monitor her status.

"...Hey, Saiga. Why don't you learn some Immortal Arts, too?"

"Happine, that's..."

Even Sansui, after five hundred years of training, can only use the basic techniques. Saiga didn't have the patience to work on such an art. Nor did he have the nerve to try to acquire near-immortality when he had multiple women he loved in his life.

"Pardon me, Lady Douve."

"What is it, Blois?"

Evidently coming to a realization in the middle of their trek, Blois turns rather apologetically to her Mistress, who is standing behind her, and speaks.

"Sansui's Master was going to sense our approach and come to us, yes?"

"Mm, that's right."

"Which should mean we need only proceed a certain distance and wait..."

The party, which had been making its way deeper into the woods, stops in mid-stride. After having traveled a distance long enough to make returning the way they came difficult, they finally choose to stop.

"...Mm, you're right."

"Couldn't you have mentioned that earlier?!"

In contrast to Douve, who admits her mistake, Happine throws a tantrum. If Eckesachs is to meet with her old master, then Saiga would have to accompany her. Happine joined the party simply out of a desire to follow Saiga, and, as a result, is having quite a fit.

"Calm down, Happine. If you want you can go on back first..."

"I won't go back! Trying to force me is going to just make me angrier!"

Raised as a sheltered noble daughter, Happine is upset at the dirt and mud. Watching her, Sunae can't help but look down upon her.

"I see the child is throwing a tantrum again..."

"Sunae, you ought to avoid so casually disparaging another. Particularly when they've shown you such hospitality."

As Sunae looks for any opening to put down Happine, Tahlan, her older brother, immediately scolds her.

"T-Tahlan..."

"Here we are not royals, but mere foreigners. Never forget that, lest you lower yourself to the level of a mere boor."

The party takes a moment to stop in place. Some take the opportunity to sit on a fallen tree, while the others wait standing for the Immortal. And,

perhaps most understandably, Eckesachs, in her form as a young woman, fidgets nervously.

"If you do not mind, Sacred Sword, I would like to ask you a question."

"What is it, Shadow Wielder?"

"What sort of man is Master Suiboku? I have heard he was considered the greatest swordsman in the world, even prior to parting ways with you," Tahlan asks Eckesachs, the only one present who has ever met Suiboku.

Based upon the unassuming Sansui, one can guess that his Master isn't particularly flashy, either, but curiosity is an unavoidable part of being human.

"...He was cheerful and carefree. That didn't change, even as our parting approached."

People do change. Ten or twenty years is enough to dramatically change a person's heart and body. Now, stretch that into a thousand years. It might be accurate to say that Eckesachs is no longer acquainted with Suiboku. The man she knew as Suiboku was a Suiboku that had existed in the distant past.

"He always said he wanted to be stronger, to be the greatest. I loved that part of him. But...he changed. No, he didn't change. He reached a destination."

"Which was?"

"He became the greatest. By the time he parted ways with me, he was considered to be without peer. He had arrived at his destination, and could no longer imagine anything greater."

The words resonate with Saiga and Tahlan. The immortal swordsman who desperately seeks to become the greatest in the world... What was he supposed to do once the world had accepted him as its greatest warrior?

"As he struggled with that realization, he dedicated himself to his training in an attempt to drive away the ennui. In the process, he realized that I was with him. That he had relied upon my presence."

There were days without end to think. And after spending those days in thought, she had arrived at the truth she didn't wish to admit.

"The greatest swordsman was the one who possessed the greatest sword and greatest skill. Having achieved that, he let go of the greatest sword. The true greatest swordsman was great regardless of his weapon. Even without a weapon, such a swordsman's skills could allow them to defeat one who wielded the Sacred Sword. No doubt that was his goal..."

And the embodiment of that goal had arrived in front of Eckesachs after fifteen hundred long years. Sansui, the latest manifestation of the greatness that Suiboku had sought.

"Nay, don't grant me such credit, dear Eckesachs. No, I have always been irredeemably foolish."

Quietly, as though he was a tree in the woods that had always been there, stood a young man. Dressed in a rough, hand-sewn kimono, the boy nonetheless gave off the air of someone far beyond the ordinary.

The unaging Immortal, Suiboku. With a wooden sword on his hip, he was similarly dressed as his apprentice.

“Suiboku...”

“It has been a long time, Eckesachs...a long time. I am pleased to see you have found yourself a new master.”

His boyishness reminded the others of Sansui. There was simply an enormous gulf between his appearance and the way he carried himself. The swordsman who had lived through more than fifteen hundred years spoke softly.

“...Forgive me.”

Unexpectedly, it was Eckesachs who offered the apology. Eckesachs, who had long insisted Suiboku had abandoned her.

Tears run down her cheeks as she apologizes to the boy.



"I...despite feeling the ennui that came from the emptiness of not being able to fulfill my purpose, I never imagined the ennui and emptiness that must have gripped you when you lost your goal, and I did nothing but reject you..."

"Nay, Eckesachs, you're mistaken. I became so caught up in my own sorrow that I refused to bend in front of you, and didn't want to expose any weakness to you, the one who acknowledged me as the greatest swordsman in the land... It was I who was unworthy."

Quietly approaching the crying young woman, the boy apologized, meeting her gaze straight on.

"It may be late, but...forgive me."

"..."

"Now, not to change the subject, but...I feel the presence of my apprentice Sansui near these woods. Since he led you here, no doubt he owes all of you a debt. I'm afraid I can't so much as offer you warm water, but allow me to extend my thanks to you. And, in particular...you, Eckesachs's new master...you have my sincere thanks."

With a serenity to his tone that no mere boy could hope to project, his thanks is enough to soothe the excitement and irritation of all who hear him.

He is, indeed, the model Immortal that Saiga and Tahlan had pictured.

"I'm Sansui's employer, Douve Sepaeda. Sansui serves as my bodyguard. He's a very able swordsman and he's been extremely useful to me."

"Oh, indeed?"

"I-I! I have the honor of being in a relationship with Sansui with the eventual goal of marriage! My name is Blois!"

"Oh, so he's thinking of marriage...I see. Well then, I leave him in your care."

As though pleasantly surprised, Suiboku responds to the nervous Blois with a smile. Of course, he's aware that Blois has slightly exaggerated the extent of their relationship.

"Um..."

"Ah, the babe from five years ago. I see you've grown."

"You know who I am?"

"Indeed. I'm the one who told him to raise you. I'm also the one who laid the woman who brought you here to rest."

"My real mom..."

"She may have been your nursemaid. But she was a strong woman, one who protected you even while being eaten by wolves. Give thanks to her."

He offers Lain a warm smile, then turns his attention to the man directing a particularly intense gaze at him.

"...A swordsman, I assume?"

"Indeed. A swordsman with a Shadow Presence, one who summons shadows. I am Magyan Tahlan, at your service."

"A swordsman...I see."

The swordsman who had spent the past fifteen centuries practicing his swing looks pleased to meet a swordsman born of the mortal world he left behind.

"Good, good...that there are still swordsmen even after fifteen centuries."

"What...do you mean by that, sir?"

"Well, it's simple. The mortal world changes so quickly. I thought perhaps that no one would still seek the path of the blade, leaving me a sad relic of the past...to learn there are still those who love the blade is a balm to my heart..."

Fifteen hundred years. It's been long enough for entire nations to rise and vanish from the pages of history. It wouldn't be particularly surprising for life to have changed substantially in that time. If anything, it would have been entirely natural to abandon the sword in favor of some new weapon. Yet, still the blade persists. There are people still using the blade like him. The joy is understandable.

"Perhaps you faced Sansui and were beaten?"

"Yes...I was hailed as without peer in my homeland, yet I stood no chance against your apprentice."

"I see, I see...my apprentice was strong, then."

"The reason I am here, despite knowing I interrupt your training, is to ask for your instruction."

Tahlan kneels in respect.

The swordsman offers his heartfelt respect to the Immortal whose skill with the blade goes far beyond his own.

"Tell me, why do you seek my instruction? Why not return to your homeland and take instruction from your own master?"

"That..."

At that query, Tahlan after a moment's hesitation, begins to answer as though putting something past him.

"I...have fled my homeland."

The words prove most shocking to Sunae. But all present, knowing Tahlan as a calm, debonair swordsman, are shocked by his confession.

"With a blade in my hand, everyone in my homeland praised me as without peer. I received sincere praise from many, yet...there is a feeling that I, myself, couldn't avoid."

His younger sister, blessed with the Royal Presence, had lost to the Academy Regent, likely one of the greatest mages in the kingdom. Then the Regent allowed him a win against her. He couldn't completely deny that he felt some dark satisfaction in that.

"With my Shadow Summoning, even putting aside the issue of succession, I cannot defeat Spirit Possession. My swordsmanship is nothing against the strength of our homeland's guardian spirit inhabiting a user of Spirit Possession. It's something I've long realized."

Simply put, his attacks aren't enough. No matter how sharp the treasured blade in his hand, Spirit Possession, which raises the very magnitude of the user's power as a living being, is still superior. Tahlan himself could not defeat many of his younger brothers and sisters, no matter how much they might respect him.

"I learned an ultimate technique, but that was my limit. I think I have been able to achieve a certain level of skill as a swordsman. However, the reason I left my homeland, more than simply wanting to test myself...was driven as much by my desire to run away from the 'greatness' represented by Spirit Possession."

An honest confession from the depths of his soul. Emotions that evoke shame and shouldn't be so easily bared. Tahlan said all this in front of one who was his superior, his younger sister, and his foreign friends.

"When I lost to your apprentice, I saw the possibility that there were still peaks to climb. But I would be lying if I said that I didn't wonder if it would allow me to defeat Spirit Possession. I...I have no desire to kill my father or my sister, but as a man, I didn't want to...I don't want to admit there is anyone in this world I cannot best."

"Ah...I see."

Those present don't simply respect Sansui's ability, but rather they place an absolute trust in his strength. The man before them, a swordsman that Sansui claimed is vastly superior to him, smiles as though pleased with Tahlan's words.

"The greatest...I see, I see. You saw Sansui fight and wished to learn his way of the blade?"

"Yes..."

"Very well. Then how do you define 'greatest?'"

The question is extremely basic and digs into the roots of the argument.

"You, Eckesachs's new master..."

"Saiga, sir."

"Saiga, then. What do you think? The sword you wield is the greatest sword in creation. She can greatly enhance the various gifts of the blood that stir within you. You, who wield her, are certainly enough to be called the greatest."

Suiboku still refers to the 'greatest' he once abandoned as the greatest.

"That's what I believed...but, I couldn't defeat your apprentice..."

"I understand, but I believe you could still consider yourself the greatest."

To the House Batterabbe party, the words feel hollow. Why? Because the man before them goes far beyond that 'greatest power.'

"How are we to define what is the greatest? To be without peer in a given country? To master the greatest ultimate technique?"

They all understand that, in itself, is difficult. That it takes an individual with talent spending long years in training to achieve.

But seeing Tahlan, who has actually achieved these things, it doesn't seem to be the right definition.

"Is it one who wields the Sacred Sword and can use countless different Arts?"

"That's..."

"None of these definitions are wrong. For example, one who wins a particular tournament can be described as the greatest, as can one who takes on one hundred opponents and prevails one hundred times."

No doubt it's an answer that he came to after long contemplation, an answer that made him let go of a sword he had at his side for decades. The 'greatest,' the 'strongest,' the thing that so many yearn for...to state that there are many ways to interpret that status...

"No doubt you believe I am the greatest. You have all witnessed the strength of my apprentice, and after hearing his praise, you don't have the desire to even test my strength. However...if I, who have spent the last fifteen centuries training in these woods, were to run into one who has trained for two thousand, ten thousand years? What then?"

The words are on a scale beyond understanding. Yet if Immortals have no set lifespan, there are no doubt those who have lived two thousand, even ten thousand years. And there's no guarantee that none of those have ever focused on the blade. And if those individuals sought to master the blade, it's possible they have reached heights beyond those attained by Suiboku himself.

"Eckesachs, do you remember Pandora?"

"Of course."

"If one who can use Pandora appeared in front of me today, even I would have no option but to run. When I had you in my hand, I was, with luck, able to win, but now, the odds are certainly against me, and I certainly can't expect a guaranteed victory."

Pandora is an Unholy Armor in House Disaea's possession. If someone were to wear it, even Suiboku couldn't be assured of victory.

"The greatest, if considered in the context of simply being the most powerful, has no fixed definition. The greatest is, instead, a goal and an ideal."

It's a simple and easy to understand answer. It's an answer that brooks no debate.

"To desire to become stronger than you are now, to have an idea of how to become stronger, and how to prove that strength... Whether that's through attaining glory, or an ultimate technique, or approval, or by defeating a powerful enemy, or winning the approval of the masses. The key is to have an ideal or goal that you set as the greatest, and then work to achieve it."

The man who had reached a height no others in the world could match, who then spent years looking for the next height... He shares his insights without reservation.

"Indeed, if all you want to do is kill someone, being the greatest is only a hindrance. It's a mistake to become stronger just to kill someone. Instead it would be better to copy the beasts of the wilderness. Conceal your presence, wait for your enemy to relax, and tear out their throat in that moment of weakness. The desire to fight, the desire to prove your strength...they're inefficient and illogical."

If simply killing someone is the goal, it's enough to bash in their head with a rock while they sleep. It's enough to sneak past their bodyguards and kill them without being noticed. There's no need for a legendary sword or countless hours of training. To kill, the greatest swordsman says, what's needed is not the power to fight, but the power to kill without fighting.

"Whether a slash from a magic-wreathed sword or an ultimate technique, from a sword master or a thug, all that happens is that a person dies. Weapons, after all, are created for that purpose."

It was an argument that was easy to follow, perhaps to be expected of Sansui's Master.

"To aspire to greatness is to choose that path for yourself. If you end up being inferior to another, or simply end up caught in a bad matchup and lose, there is nothing that can be done about that. The mistake is to believe that the quest to become the greatest, something that serves little productive purpose, can be derailed by a single loss or even a single death."

Joy in practice. Joy in training. Joy in effort. There is joy in aspiring to be the greatest. Losing is not a reason to complain.

There will be times where you lose utterly whether due to mismatched wits, uneven numbers, or even simple fate. But one who truly aspires to be the greatest isn't bothered by such things. Why? Because the days spent aspiring to that goal bring fulfillment.

"Which is why I'm overjoyed. For someone to witness my apprentice's sword and to fall in love with it... It means that you aspire to the greatness that I seek."

"...Yes, it was love at first sight."

"I see. You have my thanks."

That someone admires the art he created... It's something that brings him more joy than anything. This is why Sansui's Master so warmly greets those who follow in his footsteps.

"However, I have no intention of teaching you. Ask Sansui for instruction."

"That...may I ask why?"

With all of that considered, the Immortal tells him to seek instruction not from himself, but from his apprentice.

Tahlan isn't particularly bothered, nor does he wish to complain. The only reason Sansui refuses to instruct Tahlan is the lack of permission from his master. If that master tells him to teach Tahlan, then there's no reason for Sansui to refuse. But he was curious about the reasons for the rejection.

“Well...I understand why Sansui doesn't wish to take an apprentice. He and I have never thought to instruct people with a limited lifespan.”

The reason was something one would expect of an Immortal, for whom time has little meaning.

“However, while it's perhaps odd for me to note this, if someone with a limited lifespan can't learn my sword, then it's questionable if it's still swordsmanship at all.”

“It goes from the blade to an Immortal Art?”

“Yes. Besides...whatever the Art, whatever the training method, if you spend fifteen centuries in training, no doubt you will become strong. Am I wrong?”

Suiboku points out a fact that both he and his apprentice are faintly embarrassed to admit. And once the founder admits this, the rest of them can't deny it.

“N-no...but I doubt that training for fifteen hundred years is something most people can even manage...”

“You say that, but while I hate to contradict the previous example, at that point there's no art to it. At the very least, I've put some effort and thought into my own conclusions. Even if someone who appears who's trained for longer than I have and our blades were to clash, I wouldn't think that I could lose. After all, at that point, it simply becomes a matter of endurance. One cannot call an Art an Art if the only people you can defeat are those younger than yourself.”

Suiboku is a man who has crafted a definition of greatness through his own struggles. No doubt it wouldn't be a pleasant feeling for that greatness to be inferior to someone, just because that opponent happened to have lived longer and had spent longer training. Contrasted to the enlightened comments from earlier, it's an extremely personal comment. There's no shame or misfortune in dying in battle, but that doesn't mean he'd be satisfied with that outcome.

“And...Sansui has actually learned rather quickly.”

“No doubt...at the very least, he's stronger than you were when you abandoned me.”

Eckesachs herself compares Sansui with Suiboku's past self.

“It's such a long time ago that the memory may be hazy, but despite only training for a little over five hundred years, he's equal to where I was when I began training him.”

The scale is just so overwhelming that the mortals present almost abandon any thought of keeping up. To put it simply, even counting that he had Suiboku's instruction, Sansui had achieved a skill in five hundred years that it had taken Suiboku over a millennium to reach. He reached that same height at over twice the speed. This means that there was some meaning to Suiboku's instruction. Of course, both were impossible for an ordinary mortal.

“Which means that he’s more than ready to take an apprentice of his own. The whole point of swordsmanship is that it’s achievable by someone with talent and passion, even if they only have a limited lifespan.”

“That is...”

“As an Immortal and as a swordsman, I believe my apprentice is ready to stand on his own. Therefore, I would like my apprentice to try training mortal swordsmen.”

The swordsman who had achieved his skill by ignoring the rules of humanity therefore argues that swordsmanship is only useful if mortal people can achieve it. There is no “greatest” if that greatest is impossible for mortals to reach. It wouldn’t function as an ideal or a goal.

“Which is why I’d like to ask you to study under him. Carry on my apprentice’s sword and pass it on to the next generation. That is the only meaningful way in which an art can be said to live.”

Part 2 — Instruction

The party that had entered the woods to chat with my Master returns looking so disheveled that they look like entirely different people.

After a quick change of clothes, we hop onto the carriage and they tell me what they discussed with my Master.

"I see. To think, Master said that..."

Everyone who went into the woods seems to have had their nerves soothed after speaking to Master Suiboku.

There was plenty for me to learn, as well. Abandoning the man in front of me isn't particularly virtuous. At a minimum, he's someone who's put a lot more thought into his desire to improve than I had when I began learning under my Master. It wouldn't be right for me to abandon him.

"If my Master has given his blessing, then I will accept you as my apprentice. Of course, it depends on Lady Douve's approval."

"...You have it. Make sure he won't die, even on the worst battlefield."

"That's not possible..."

"Do it anyway!"

Lady Douve, you make it sound so easy, but there's no such thing as an unkillable person. Even my Master and I would probably die under the wrong circumstances.

"Hah! I see that even the great master swordsman has yet to learn how to handle a lady. This is not a time for modesty, but for reassurance with a bit of bravado!"

"I'm afraid I've spent most of my time in practice..."

As Tahlan says, talk alone costs nothing. But when it comes to the blade, I can't simply provide cheap reassurance.

"...Speaking of which, your Master mentioned that he never planned to teach normal people, and you yourself say you've only ever spent time in practice. What are you planning to do, specifically?"

"Yes, that's the issue, isn't it..."

I can't very well have him do practice swings from sunrise to sunset without eating or drinking. Even if I had him do it, I doubt he'd learn anything. It'd just end up as an endurance contest culminating in his injury.

"Tch. I mean, on that subject, there's no way you could get that powerful just by doing practice swings. Just what's the truth here? Don't you have some sort of secret method you use to get stronger?"

Happine points out the obvious.

No doubt I would have felt the same way in the past. In fact, I actually thought that a few times in the beginning. But the reality is different. Training for Immortals is predicated on patiently spending time working until the breakthrough happens.

"I don't want to be the one to say this, but there's no point to secret training methods for someone who can spend five hundred years training."

"S-Sure, that's true, but...your technique to make yourself or others lighter, the teleporting from place to place, the strike technique...they're not something you can learn just from swinging a wooden sword, are they?"

She seems to be extremely curious about this. I mean, it's a tantalizing thing to think about. The training method of a great sword master. However, I've never done anything as impressive as splitting a boulder with a steel sword.

"Both my Master and I are users of the Immortal Arts, so...that sort of explanation was, well, unnecessary, so to speak..."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll explain the steps of my training, but it's not going to be very interesting."

"That's fine. Tell me. It won't take that long to explain, if all you're doing is talking, right?"

It's not a question of how long the explanation takes as much as that it's uninteresting...

"At first my Master instructed me to do practice swings next to him from morning to dusk. We'd wake up together at sunrise, then go to sleep at sunset. On days when it rained we'd sit inside the hut and weave clothes or sandals and maybe chat a little, but we didn't do much else."

We continued that way for five hundred years. Okay, so that's a little too dull, even for me.

I guess I'll go a bit more into the specifics.

"Practicing sword swings in the great outdoors... It sounds fine, but it's not a particularly interesting way of spending time. At first, I would practice next to my Master, just wishing for the time to pass as quickly as possible. However, by the time my hands were covered with blisters, I began to realize that I couldn't keep doing things the same way — I wasn't learning anything."

I think this is a normal reaction. At the very least, I notice Saiga nodding along in agreement.

"I began to think about just how much time I spent in practice, how many times I would swing in a day. I started carving marks into rocks just to keep track of it."

The days since I started training. The number of times I practiced my swing. I thought to convert the knowledge of how much time I spent into confidence in my efforts.

"At a certain point, I then realized that I'd become caught up in those numbers and hadn't actually made any progress."

"What was your Master doing all this time?"

"He had been practicing next to me."

Everyone's gone completely quiet.

Well, everyone but Tahlan, it seems. He seems to know that excessive instruction can hamper rather than help, at least.

"Feeling a bit of panic at that realization, I began to pay attention to my swings, trying to confirm that I was doing them properly. Which then...leads to the realization that my swings up to that point had been wrong. That everything I'd done was wrong. With that recognition, I started relearning how to swing a sword."

Everyone except Tahlán seems a bit exasperated at that explanation. Well, sure, it means my Master really didn't teach me much of anything.

"And it's at that point where I finally began to watch my Master's movements. That helps me figure out what I'm doing wrong by comparing my motions to my Master's motions. It allows me to realize that a sword swing isn't about arm strength or muscle mass, but how I use my entire body."

It goes without saying, but practicing sword swings doesn't involve just standing up straight and using just your shoulders and arms to move your blade. When you do it, you start to notice things like your positioning and center of gravity.

"That is where I began to correct things like my weak-kneed stance and the like. But once I focused on correcting my overall posture, I began to neglect my arms. So I then began focusing on parts that I'd neglected. Once that happens, I started neglecting other parts of my form, and as I'm correcting each part...the sun goes down."

It's at around this stage where it finally stops being a struggle to practice from sunrise to sunset. It's replaced by an understanding that time passes quickly while practicing. Before bed each night, your thoughts go automatically to what you can improve the next day.

"With repetition, I then gained an understanding of just how each of my joints function during a swing. And with that understanding, I could distribute my awareness over my entire body. Once that became a natural part of my movements and I stopped thinking about doing it...I became aware of my muscles again."

After understanding your own skeletal structure and how your joints move, you return to an awareness of how your muscles move in response. There's still an awkwardness in me, when compared to my Master's movements. Since the issue isn't in the joints, the problem is in my muscles.

"I then notice that each time I take a practice swing, there are sections where I apply too much strength, or parts where I don't apply enough strength. Focusing too much on how my muscles move then throws my joint alignment out of order again. Once that happens, things fall apart for a bit, until I manage to unify them once more through intense focus. Then, I manage finally to get closer to my Master."

Lain looks sleepy. As the level of dullness goes beyond even what she had imagined possible, Lady Douve just looks sick of the explanation.

"Once I realized that, I also realized that I can grasp my Master's movement despite not being able to see him. Turning my attention to my own body's movements, I then notice that I also have a heightened

awareness of what's going on around me. As I grasp my own body's state, I also grasp the state of my Master standing next to me. Which then...reveals just how large the gap is between me and my Master. So I begin correcting my movements to get closer to his."

This is a sense that only Immortals with the Immortal Presence can achieve, which means it's something that Tahlan, with his Shadow Presence, can't hope to grasp.

"Focusing on one part, then being able to focus on the whole, and eventually learning to do that naturally... With enough repetition, that awareness extends into the blade, forming an awareness of the length, the shape, how best to swing to obtain blade speed, and how to land the heaviest blow. The understanding expands with time."

Without ever leaving the basics, this expands into wider and wider applications. Which is why the transition from one phase to another was gradual, almost excessively so.

"Continuing with that practice, I then realized that my own Immortal Presence connects to the nature in the woods around me. Like how a mage grasps the flow of mana, I gained an understanding of my Immortal Presence through my blade. This took about a hundred years."

"...I can't find a single thing to admire about your Master..."

"The Immortal Arts aren't something that can be taught through books or lectures. It requires a connection to nature, and from there nature takes its own course."

I mean, I don't even remember when I became an Immortal. The Immortal Arts are something you just sort of end up grasping.

"Still, once I could read the Immortal Presence in my Master, I began to understand how he'd manipulate it to do things like the Cloud Step when he was gathering the materials to make his clothes and sandals, so it's not wrong to say I learned those techniques from my Master."

"I have heard that Immortals meditate to get closer to nature, but it appears Master Suiboku uses practice swings in lieu of meditation..."

Tahlan is the only one listening seriously.

"I have never met another Immortal other than my Master, but I believe you're correct."

The others have started wandering into escapism because of the sheer scale of the explanation. To top it off, Lain's already gone to sleep.

"Once I learned to use the techniques, I started to gain a certain confidence, an overconfidence, even. 'I'm pretty strong now,' that sort of thing. Or, 'I've put so much effort into this, I've gotten strong;' the sort of cockiness that comes from immaturity."

"...Are you sure that's immaturity?" Lady Douve asks, exasperated.

"Yes, it unsettles the heart and leads to unnecessary tension. Training then consists of making those adjustments."

"Oh, really..."

"Immortals recognize the imperfections in themselves. So we can also see the problems that come from overconfidence. Still, it's hard to hold back a sense of superiority that comes from your own ability or a desire to look down on others. The thing that I relied upon at those times was nature itself. By spreading my awareness into the vastness of nature around me and watching the progress of life, I was able to come to a conclusion of just how small and insignificant I was, at least, eventually...that took about two hundred years."

"Alright, never mind. You shouldn't teach Tahlan."

Lady Douve states the obvious.

It's true that Immortals don't look to acquire their skills in a short span of time. There's no desire to allow others to pick up those skills quickly. They can't have that outlook. That's because they have no set lifespan. Of course, there's no such thing as a life that can't end tomorrow, but if the discussion goes that far, then if it ends tomorrow, that's all there was to that life. Immortals can only look at the world in a way that doesn't go against the natural order and simply accepts whatever happens. Any discontent or anger can't be acted upon to resist fate. That's what it means to cut yourself off from the mortal world. Which means we don't bother setting goals like where you want to be in a hundred years, or two hundred years, and the very act of thinking that way is a sign of immaturity.

"Hah! No need to be so prickly, Lady Douve. As a warrior, all of those lessons are things I could grasp and understand."

"Yes, Lady Douve. Not to put it the wrong way, but Prince Tahlan has already reached a certain level of skill. As I'm not teaching him the Immortal Arts, there's no need for him to spend a hundred years in practice."

A prince of a kingdom, taught by first-class masters, having achieved a level of skill that made him the greatest in his kingdom... There wouldn't be any weird habits or things that I need to correct. He's an elite Shadow Summoner and an elite swordsman. This is why both my Master and I took a liking to Tahlan. Of course, I'm sure my Master also took a liking to Eckesachs's new master, who decided to split a boulder with a steel sword, for a different reason.

"If anything, the main reason I was hesitant to teach Prince Tahlan is because he is already well trained. If I'm to teach Prince Tahlan, I would have to teach him that our style of swordplay relies, to a large extent, upon the senses unique to Immortals."

I'm not sure it's something I should be saying myself, but I suppose that's part of why my Master also describes our swordsmanship as being an extension of the Immortal Arts...it's extremely hard to teach to people other than Immortals. Of course, that's not to say we can neglect the steps before that, but...

"Very well. Once we return to the estate, I'll begin by explaining the step before that."

Tahlan appears to be looking forward to it, but it's not going to be easy to teach, nor is it going to be particularly revolutionary.

It's just that we do the things that he already knows how to do at a much higher level.

Part 3 — Demonstration

It's the day after everyone had gone off to Master Suiboku's, and I'm preparing to begin my first practical instruction session with a demonstration. We're on the front lawn of Lady Douve's estate near the Academy. I'm about to instruct the parties from House Batterabbe and Sepaeda on the practical applications of the final stage of my Master's Art.

"Ah, I understand about Your Lordships being here, but why are the cavalry troopers here as well?"

"You, this kingdom's greatest swordsman, are going to be instructing a foreign swordsman. Surely there's no problem for your employers, the men of House Sepaeda, to sit in on the lesson?"

"It's instruction from one who has mastered the art of swordplay. It's natural that we would be interested, is it not?"

Oh dear, this seems to have gotten a little out of hand. His Brothership, His Fathership, the cavalry troopers under their command have all disarmed, to some extent, and have taken up positions to observe the lesson.

"Well, I certainly don't mind..."

"So you need me to serve as the opponent?"

It's times like these that the near-amateur Saiga comes in handy.

"Yes, thank you."

After all, I need to teach not just Tahlan, but also Lady Douve. Lady Douve is a complete amateur, so I'll probably have to start with the basics.

"First, I'll begin with space — that is, the distance between yourself and your opponent..."

With that, I hand Saiga a practice spear. For obvious reasons, it doesn't have a metal tip. It's a wooden stick with the tip wrapped in cloth, a standard practice spear in use by House Sepaeda.

"Lord Saiga. Go ahead and stab at me with this spear."

"A-Alright...like this?"

"Yes, that's fine."

Saiga's a complete beginner when it comes to spears, but it appears that he can at least make it look a little convincing, mostly thanks to his practice with the sword. Of course, it's just that he looks like he's taking the right steps and making the right attack. He's got high physical abilities, so I'm sure he can hold his own, but his skills are those of a complete beginner.

"A thrusting attack from a spear is easy to understand. Alright, please pause after you've finished your thrust. This should make it easier to grasp, but...this is the limit of Lord Saiga's range with a spear."

I tap the tip of the practice spear with my finger. Then, I move right in front of the spear tip.

"It may be obvious, but no matter how many times he repeats his thrusting attacks, he'll never be able to reach me if I'm standing here. Of course, since Lord Saiga is an amateur with a spear, there will be some

variation in distance, but if he wishes to hit with any impact, this is the limit of his range."

With that understood, I have him drop back into a ready stance. It's essentially a middle stance, a neutral stance. He's grasping the spear with arms that are slightly bent at the elbows, and he can lunge in any direction at any time.

"Now, let's say I step inside next to the prepared spear. While he can certainly perform a counterattack with the right technique, if he wishes to actually lunge at me with the spear, Lord Saiga would have to take a step or two back. Therefore, I'm currently beyond the inner arc of his effective range."

I approach Saiga as he stands in his ready stance. I'm now standing inside the point of the spear tip. In this sort of situation, a polearm is at a disadvantage, which is why spearmen are trained to feint to keep opponents out of this range, or to kill them before they can get this close.

"Which is why the effective range of a spear is a bit inside of where I was standing, to a bit behind where I'm standing now, by the spear tip."

"W-Well, sure."

"Now, as a basic point, there's a greater advantage to being able to attack from a longer distance than not. The reason most weapons are better than unarmed attacks comes from the combination of greater lethality and the ability to attack from long range."

'Obviously,' it seems Lady Douve wants to say, looking rather bored. The same can be said of Happine and Zuger. It's such an obvious thing that they don't understand just how hard it is to accurately gauge.

"Getting inside someone's effective range is a relatively easy concept to understand. After all, you simply have to get closer to that weapon than it can attack. However, it's extremely difficult to gauge the limits of a weapon's range. As an example, I'm going to step outside your range and slowly close the distance... Try attacking when you think I'm back in range."

"O-Okay..."

Seems Saiga understands what I'm trying to demonstrate, and avoids using his divination.

After I open up some distance, I steadily approach him at a walk. His spear point wavers as he struggles to figure out the exact timing. The anxiety about the right time to attack shows pretty clearly in his expression. And the moment I get just inside his range, by my reckoning, he attacks. I easily avoid the lunge.

"Lady Douve. How did it appear to you? Did he wait until I was within range?"

"Yes, it looked like he had it right."

"It's relatively easy to see as a third party. If the opponent is also armed with a spear and is in the same stance, you can get some sense of the range once the spears overlap, but it's actually rather hard to grasp if someone approaches unarmed. Still, it's possible to gauge the range using the spear

tip, the distance between it, what's in front of it. However, that also means that it tells me his effective distance, as well. Further, he's so focused on his spear tip that he loses sight of everything around him."

The fighters present are nodding along to the explanation. It's one thing to misjudge range in unarmed combat, but misjudging range with weapons leads straight to death. Outside the effective range is safety, and inside the effective range is a constant threat.

"The space where an attack can connect, think of that as the 'effective range,' and from there consider that 'space.' Next, let's talk about 'opening' — that is, 'opportunity.' Lord Saiga, have you ever played baseball?"

"Huh? Well, yeah..."

"Then let's play a bit. I'll be the pitcher."

We're suddenly about to play baseball, but Saiga doesn't seem too bothered. Well sure, it's much simpler to play baseball than to try to stab someone with a spear.

"My wooden sword should be fine as a bat. We'll use a random rock as the ball..."

"Y-You sure that's okay?"

"You don't have to hit the stuffing out of it. Just make contact."

It's the first time in five hundred years I've played baseball. You know, I'm probably the only one who's ever had five hundred years between one baseball game and another. But I suppose that if I start thinking about it, I'd be the only one doing all sorts of things five hundred years apart.

At any rate, I grab a rock about the size of my fist and throw it at a pretty good speed. Of course, I wind up before throwing, like an ordinary pitcher in baseball. Saiga hits the rock with his bat. It's not like I threw it fast enough for him to lose sight of it, so there's nothing odd about him hitting it. Additionally, we weren't using a baseball bat and ball, so it doesn't fly off as a home run. The rock, hitting the wooden sword, just rolls a little bit after contact.

"Well done. Next, I'll throw it a bit slower."

"O-Okay..."

Saiga shows confusion about exactly what I'm trying to get at, but drops into a batting stance anyway.

I pick up another fist-sized rock and, without a wind-up, I toss it at him. Thrown without any wind-up, it's slower than the last rock, but as he's caught off guard, Saiga can't make contact with it using the wooden sword. Yes, he just swings and misses.

"Seems you missed..."

"T-That came out of nowhere...! What was that for?"

"Just having a little fun, it's nothing that profound. Anyway, why is it you missed a rock that was slower than the one you hit earlier?"

"Well...that's because you threw it without warning..."

He's half right.

"It's because I threw it without a wind-up, isn't it?"

"Y-Yeah..."

"No matter how fast it might be, if there's a big warning before the attack comes, you'll be able to respond to it somehow. However, if there's no warning at all, it's easier to catch the opponent off guard. More importantly, they don't have time to mentally prepare themselves. Essentially, they can't read the 'opening.'"

When the attack is going to start, when the attack does start... If you can avoid showing those to your opponent, the attacker is at a substantial advantage. To put it another way, knowing when the attack begins is the 'opening' and trying to find your opponent's opening is what we call 'seeking an opening.'

"No matter how fast the attack, if you tip off your opponent beforehand, even attacks that can hit won't hit. Of course, that's only if the opponent has the presence of mind to notice."

If you're intimidated, there's no such thing as an 'opening' to find. If you don't have the courage to face off against an opponent that's showing hostility and who intends to kill you, it doesn't matter if you're wearing armor or armed with a blade, you'll still just die. That's an obvious truth, whether we're talking about the wilderness or the battlefield.

"Now, let me demonstrate what it means to master that. Lord Saiga, use that wooden sword to attack me with a high downward slash."

"With a large wind-up?"

"Yes. However...do it very slowly. As though you're a lumbering cow."

Despite a touch of confusion, Saiga approaches within striking range from the batter-pitcher distance we had been at a moment before. He's in the stance of the slash he's best at, the slash he used to split a boulder. It's a powerful stroke that can kill an enemy by putting his entire weight behind the attack, but he attacks at a glacial pace.

"Sloooooowly."

"Yes. Like that."

It's at a speed a child could avoid, so I'm sure even Lady Douve and the others could manage to dodge it. With that factored in, I avoid it. Obviously, no one's surprised.

"What does this tell us, exactly?"

"Lord Saiga, when did you realize that your attack missed? That you swung through air?"

"Well...I can tell just by looking."

That's right. If both sides are moving slowly, then it's obvious the moment that one side moves. That goes without saying. But if both sides are moving quickly, it's much harder to grasp.

"Then attack me slowly again. I'll also move slowly, so just try to hit me."

"R-Right."

He repeats the slow attack. As he does, I make a very obvious motion to avoid it, slowly circling around Saiga as the attack is in the middle of coming down.

Of course, Saiga is also watching my movements, so he shifts the trajectory of his attack equally slowly, confirming my movements with his eyes, moving the sword so that it hits me...and makes contact.

"Nicely done."

"...So, what's the point?"

"Alright, next. Miss Eckesachs, could you come over here?"

I take back my wooden sword and call Eckesachs over. The ultimate sword, once wielded by my Master. She amplifies magic abilities, but she's also really, really sharp.

I have Saiga pick up Eckesachs in sword form, and we repeat the same actions.

"Lord Saiga, take a practice swing with Eckesachs."

"Right...this okay?"

"Yes, that's fine. Now, try to rapidly adjust the trajectory of your swing like you just did."

"Huh? O-Okay, I'll give it a shot."

Because it's a practice swing, he's able to change the angle of the swing 90 degrees mid-swing. However, it doesn't have the speed of the swing that could split a boulder. The change in direction killed the swing's momentum. It was an unnatural movement, and Saiga himself doesn't seem satisfied with the result.

"Swords are heavy, particularly steel combat blades. If you wish to stop a swing with such a heavy blade in mid-swing and alter the direction of the blow, it takes an enormous amount of strength. Further, it would reduce your blade speed and impact. Because it's a strike that you've thrown your entire body and spirit behind, it's impossible to fully change mid-swing."

"Ah, I see...yes, that's true."

"Which is why you do feints and attempt to take your opponent off balance before that strike..."

This is the logic behind the ultimate Shadow Summoning technique, 'Sword Dance of Shadows,' a technique that uses summoned duplicates as a way to maneuver the opponent into your full-strength strike.

It's a move that requires precise control of both the summoned shadows and one's swordsmanship, worthy of the name 'ultimate technique.'

"Now, on an ordinary battlefield, there's almost no time to do any of this. Nor is there any need to."

"Huh?"

"On a battlefield, while there may be a difference in extent, you're almost always fully equipped, including with armor. Further, there's a certain concentration of people, meaning it's next to impossible to elegantly avoid attacks. Hence, the use of weapons that are so heavy as to be unblockable, the strength to swing such weapons, or the use of magic...the armored combat arts. That is, combat arts predicated on both sides being fully armed and armored."

It's a style of combat where strength, size, and weaponry are what determines victory. There's nothing wrong with that logic. In fact, it's the proper logic when talking about survival of the fittest. It's also not as easy to do as it is to describe. There's nothing easy about fighting in armor so heavy that it saps your strength just by wearing it. From the training to actual fighting, there's nothing simple or easy about it.

"However, the height that my Master sought was not armored swordsmanship, but unarmored swordsmanship. A form of the blade that assumes the wielder wears no armor and is not fighting on a battlefield, but rather to protect. Put another way, a blade form that puts the emphasis on technique."

I place my wooden sword back into my sash. Then I stand in front of Saiga.

I'm so far into his effective range that it's obvious at a glance.

"Try your full-strength strike."

"...You're sure?"

"Yes, of course."

Even if I were to block it with my wooden sword, Eckesachs would go through it and me like we were butter. For the sake of argument, if Saiga's sword was a normal steel sword, it's possible I wouldn't be able to stop his strike with my arm strength. No, even with a wooden sword instead of a steel one, if it hit my head, it could be more than enough to kill me.

"Alright...yaaah!"

It may not be much to me, but it's a strike that can cut through stone, backed by training and effort. A strike that has all of Saiga's body and soul behind it. Even facing that, my heart is calm.

Without using my Immortal Arts, I step forward and to the right, lightly smacking Saiga's face with my palm. The blow, unleashed with the intention of splitting me in two, cuts nothing but air and carries Saiga forward with it.

"Well done. A proper strike that could split even stone. It was a strike worthy of the heir to the martial House Batterabbe."

"...You mocking me?"

"No, not at all. I was able to see your 'blade.' I'm pleased."

Sure, in terms of actual skill he's nowhere near me, Tahlan, or Blois. But it was still a good strike. A perfect strike for him, one can defend himself with his mystic arts.

"Now, Lord Saiga. When did you realize that you missed?"

"...Well..."

"Earlier you noticed when it missed...that is, when I moved out of the way. But this time, I believe you didn't realize it until your blade almost hit the ground."

"Well, yeah..."

"This is the parry that my Master sought to perfect."

Trying to explain it in text shows just how ridiculous the idea is. In a sense it's an ideal for unarmored swordplay, but what my Master sought was to be able to always do it, whatever the circumstances.

"Wait until the opponent has started to attack, avoid the attack once they can no longer alter the trajectory, then attack before the opponent's realized their attack has missed. In our school, this is what we call gaining the 'post-initiative.'"

Let's say the opponent attacks with lightning magic. The lightning itself isn't something a human being can parry. For the person being attacked by the lightning, the spell has already hit by the time they can see the flash. There's no way to respond to that. But that also means that the opponent who unleashed the lightning can't know if the spell made contact or not until after the moment of contact. The key is to control not the lightning, but the person wielding it.

"Or take the 'pre-initiative' and hit the opponent between the moment they decide to attack and the moment they begin to move. This is what my Master, Suiboku, sought to achieve."

"Lightning Slasher..." one of the cavalry troopers murmurs, as though aware of what I was thinking.

"If we're both moving slowly, like we were earlier, then no matter how the opponent moves, there's no way to catch the other side by surprise. However, because both sides are moving quickly, it's possible to attack them before they notice our movement."

"Don't think that's possible..." Saiga says in shock. Everyone else is also silent from the surprise.

If anything, Saiga is more aware of the difficulty than most, thanks to his precognition. Taking time to 'think' to respond to an opponent... The time to 'focus' on the opponent... That would make this sort of swordplay impossible. That's because your brain and body wouldn't react as you wanted them to. It's a height that can only be achieved if everything happens completely naturally, without conscious thought.

"A fully equipped opponent will try to block attacks against them using their shield or weapon. That is why the response is to train the body, to create a weapon too heavy to guard against, and then bring it down against them. Alternately, you wear armor and carry shields heavy enough to withstand the enemy's full might...this means that you turn yourself into a harder stone for your opponent, the softer stone, to break themselves against."

If one has a strength of ten, one can easily defeat an opponent with a strength of five. However, that still imposes a cost on yourself. No matter how strong you might become, you'll still tire against a weaker opponent. Which means that, so long as the enemy prepares sufficient numbers, you'll eventually wear yourself out against them.

That's not the 'greatest strength.' If that's the height that the strongest individual, with the strongest weapon and the greatest amount of training can achieve, then that's meaningless. It's tragic.

"The height, the 'greatest strength' that my Master sought to achieve, was the ability to attack one-sidedly. It's not about attacking the opponent with a strength that they can't defend against, or to attack from a range that the enemy can't reach, or to attack at a speed the opponent can't catch. It's to claim the 'opening' that the opponent doesn't notice. If that's possible, then no matter how many thousands, how many tens of thousands of opponents you face, you can do so without getting a scratch."

Eckesachs, returning to her human form, takes another look at me. She understands the logic behind the 'sword' that my Master has bestowed upon me.

"At those heights, there's no need for feints or unbalancing. All attacks become single strike kills. No, there's no need for them to kill. That's the Suiboku School of Swordsmanship."

Taking all those practice swings means achieving a deep understanding of one's own body. It means understanding how you move your body, how a human will move a human body. It means an understanding of where your center of gravity is and when you should put your strength into your movements. It means a complete understanding of your center of gravity, your posture, *and* the changes in your muscles as you move, all at the same time.

Those are the basics and they form the foundation.

Regardless of what weapon the opponent wields, whether they are human or beast, you grasp their movements from their posture and breathing. After spending a long time understanding yourself, you're able to understand others.

"To fully master this, my Master spent a thousand years in training. Even copying my Master, it took me five hundred years to learn."

To go from being able to do it when you're lucky, to being able to do it when in the right state, to doing it almost entirely without fail, to always being able to do it, and finally being able to do it naturally.

To make that possible, that's the amount of time it takes.

"And my Master is still looking far beyond this. However, that's the realm of Immortals. Prince Tahlan, with your talent, if you build up the experience and spend several years in training with the right mindset, you will reach a certain height."

"It sounds impossible, honestly..."

Lady Douve, there's no end if you start saying that.

"I see...that's the mastery he attained."

Eckesachs, who had been abandoned by my Master, seems to have come to a certain amount of understanding after hearing my explanation.

Really, the things I just described are things first-rate swordsmen do naturally as part of having their trained senses. It's just that my Master and I have taken that mastery to its natural conclusion.

That means that my Master should have been able to do it to some extent in the past, albeit not whenever he wished.

"For an Immortal, five hundred years is an eyeblink in terms of training. I thought you skilled for that small amount of time, but that's because you focused upon mastering your swordsmanship rather than learning Immortal Arts techniques. Still, you'll probably struggle against particularly tough enemies or large numbers of them."

"It is as you say."

In my third battle with Saiga, his defenses were already more than my attacks could penetrate.

I was able to overcome them because I knew Eckesachs had strengthened his magic, and because I could take Eckesachs from him, due to Eckesachs being a 'sword' rather than 'armor.'

Had he genuinely mastered that level of mystic armor on his own, or if his magic had been amplified by something that wasn't easy to remove, like a breastplate, gauntlet, or helmet, then I wouldn't have been able to use that same tactic.

I mean, the Immortal Arts, unlike magic, don't have much in the way of attack abilities.

"Which is why...your personal greatness isn't designed with the possibility of fighting the Unholy Armor, Pandora, in mind."

"Pandora, the legendary armor said to be owned by House Disaea... If I have to fight its wearer, then at that point it'll be Saiga, not Sansui, fighting them."

The ultimate Sacred Sword says this as she tries to cheer up her new wielder.

Part 4 — Opposing Sides

"I admit, I struggle to comprehend your decision."

"I fully understand what you wish to say, Your Highness."

Setenve Arcana, Eldest Daughter of House Arcana, First Princess of the Kingdom.

With a harsh expression, she fixes a glare upon Paulette Caputo.

There is no angry shouting, simply a continuous, merciless litany of arguments that drive the opponent into the corner. Setenve, a skilled debater, is most comfortable with this method, but Paulette responds with a calm serenity.

"There is currently an enemy army gathering upon our territory's border. The forces of the Neo-Domino Empire...or, rather, the forces of the Domino Republic. Our knights, led by House Caputo's paladins, are already in position."

"...I have never doubted your House's knights or their ability. Your paladins, while small in number, with their combat-oriented Mystic Arts, their high level of training, and their high morale, are extremely effective. Further, this war will be a defensive battle, primarily holding fortresses in siege warfare. I suppose you believe the Republic, with their lack of war materiel, are no threat?"

"...I imagine you suspect me, and House Caputo, of not wanting to allow the armies of the other Great Houses, or the Royal Family, into our territory."

There is, at least on paper, a gap between the Royal Family and the Four Great Houses. At least, that's the public understanding of the power relationship.

Further, because the Four Great Houses have a certain level of wealth and power, they have little incentive to try for greater power and risk conflict with the Royal Family and the other noble houses. At least, not in terms of armed conflict. They are, however, not above competing with one another for influence, so long as it doesn't rise to the level of civil war.

At the very least, they are not likely to call for reinforcements from the other houses when faced with an invasion. The preference would be to defend their lands without help from the outside, and all four of the Great Houses possess sufficient forces to actually do so.

"Yes, it's foolish vanity. At the very least, I am not so sanguine about this situation."

Economic problems... That doesn't simply mean a lack of money. It's a much more serious issue. With economic problems come a shortage of food, a shortage of craftsmen, a shortage of labor...so much so that even damaged buildings are just left as they are. A bad economy spurs an increase in crime, and both show no signs of improvement. This is what's meant by economic problems for the Domino Republic.

By way of contrast, the Arcana Kingdom is relatively prosperous. Its armies are well-equipped, well-trained, well-paid and have good morale.

If an impoverished country, with nothing left to lose, makes a desperate push for plunder with an ill-equipped and ill-trained army...it is, perhaps, not much of a threat.

"Certainly, siege warfare favors the defender. Particularly if the attacker has no reliable source of supply. The fortress cities that are the keystones of your border defenses are well-supplied. They're essentially impregnable."

"Yes, I suppose so..."

"If you were facing an ordinary army, that is. This enemy, however, is nothing close to ordinary."

It may be an obvious point, but it's not as though the Arcana Kingdom simply sat on its hands until the Domino Empire lost to its rebels. They had sent intelligence agents to discover why the rebellion had been successful.

"You are aware, I believe, of the human-shaped tools created by the gods."

"You refer to examples such as the Sacred Sword Eckesachs that House Batterabbe recently obtained, or the Unholy Armor Pandora, owned by House Disaea..."

"Yes, the Eight Sacred Treasures. They're not merely things of legend. They exist, and we know their abilities."

"Yes, I'm aware."

"The enemy leader has four of the eight. That is, all of them, other than the two in our kingdom, Noah the Ark, and Danua the Plentiful."

Of course, it's not the case that there's nothing to do against an individual who possesses half of the Sacred Treasures. However, one of them is extremely troublesome.

"Ungaikyo, the Mirror of Truth...no doubt you know of it."

"...Domino is in possession of that treasure?"

"Yes. They used its power to topple the old regime."

Hearing the name, Paulette suddenly has an expression of deep sadness. Yes, knowledge of the mirror's abilities was enough to remove any optimism.

"Wow, this stuff is impressive. The weapons our new 'leader' has provided us, that is..."

"With weapons like these, this war will be a piece of cake!"

They don't plan to massacre the enemy's subjects, of course, but at the bare minimum they plan to attack the territories at their destination, pillage their foodstuffs, and, during the peace settlement, force them to pay up in coin. Their actions go far beyond armed robbery, but as it's a question of life or death, morale is high among the former rebels.

These soldiers, who had defeated the Empire's armies and experienced victory, weren't originally trained soldiers. They're an army of revolutionaries who had suffered under the yoke of oppression and rose up

when a leader appeared to guide them. To put it baldly, most had carried farming implements instead of weapons until recently, and there were a number of women scattered throughout their ranks.

Most haven't received any formal training. They don't show much discipline on the march, with plenty of chattering between soldiers. Indeed, their procession was barely worthy of the name of a march. Even the most partial observer would note that they don't look anything close to properly organized. As for numbers making up for their lack of discipline, they weren't plentiful enough for that. It's hard to consider this force sufficient for doing something as difficult as sustained siege warfare.

However, there's good cause for their optimism: their equipment.

Despite the fact that they are peasant soldiers, all of them wore magically enchanted armor. Their weapons, too, were magic swords and magic spears. There was more. Many of them carried scrolls, disposable items that, when unfurled, would unleash a single spell at the enemy. They were expensive, but effective. Rows of horse-drawn carts filled with healing magic-infused scrolls accompanied the ranks, more than enough to make up for their lack of training.

"Yep, so long as we have these scrolls, we're all mages!"

"And these magic helmets, shields, and suits of armor used to be national treasures in our country!"

"With all this stuff, there's no way we can lose!"

The scrolls were crammed with spells powerful enough to substitute for siege weaponry. All of the soldiers were equipped with such scrolls. It would be strange if this army lost. No matter how many mystics the enemy might prepare, they can't possibly have more than a thousand or so. But this army... Several tens of thousands of soldiers, all capable of casting spells that can bring down castles. And thanks to the nearly endless supply of scrolls, none of them would ever tire.

No matter how powerful the fortress, it was but a candle in the wind before this army.

"Long live the new supreme leader!"

"We'll secure what we need for winter, for sure!"

"Ungaikyo, the Mirror of Truth. That treasure's ability is to duplicate equipment. While the duplicates disappear after a year, and might be slightly less powerful than the originals, it's capable of creating an infinite number of these replicas. A single prototype, created without regard for mass production, can spawn equipment for an entire army."

"...Which is how they overthrew the old regime..."

"Yes. And the mass-produced magic items are provided to all of their soldiers. They've created so many copies of magic scrolls and equipment, worthy of being called national treasures, that they can equip every single one of their soldiers and yet have many left in reserve."

Of course, the mirror can't duplicate food. If it could, the neighboring country would have no need to invade. And while it was certainly possible to duplicate currency, a country can't afford to counterfeit disappearing coins at the government level and still sustain an economy. Finally, creating building equipment was pointless, as the supplies would vanish after a year...

All of this meant that the true value of the Ungaikyo was as a way to manufacture consumable items, such as weapons, en masse.

"They won't last a night! Not even your border fortresses!"

At Setenve's words, Paulette bent her head in prayer. A prayer for the countless people who were going to die on the battlefield, despite being in the middle of a conversation, the sheer tragedy of the situation left her unable to do otherwise.

"...Your Highness."

"What is it?"

"I am told you studied at the Royal Academy."

After her prayer, Paulette switches to an apparently unrelated conversation. However, it doesn't appear to be a joke. Setenve nods, her motions hesitant due to suspicion.

"Is the Regent still doing well?"

"Yes. She has her moments of oddness, but she is still an excellent servant to the Crown."

The woman who serves as the Regent is one of the kingdom's greatest mages. Due to her age, a single day's exertion might require several days of bed rest afterward, but she remains one of the kingdom's most powerful spellcasters.

"I hear that her lectures are extremely popular."

"Quite. They're extremely entertaining, while also being thoroughly educational. There are plenty of people who participate because they find it entertaining, but that is what's so impressive about her teaching. Further, the content is very important."

"Yes. To learn not simply from the successes of our forebears, but from their failures. It's a wonderful thing."

Paulette then sighs, without an effort to disguise it. It's an extremely rude gesture, bordering on *lese majeste* in front of the princess. The gesture is so out of character for someone as proper and polite as Paulette that Setenve is confused, rather than angry.

"I beg your pardon...at any rate, there is an example in that lesson of using earth magic to attack from the sky."

"Yes, the idea was interesting, but it could never work in practice. Still, it was not like he tested it in combat. He did his test under proper, safe conditions. I have no intention of mocking his attempt."

To fly overhead using wind magic, then create a large stone with earth magic, and drop it from the air... The intent was to use not simply the power from the spell, but also include the acceleration from freefall, to do

substantially greater damage. The reasoning behind it, at least, wasn't particularly ridiculous.

"However. The effective range of your average mage is about a hundred meters. Beyond that the accuracy plummets, as does the power. A powerful mage might be able to double that range, but two hundred meters is still in visual range, and it's all over if you take an enemy's counterattack."

"Indeed, that's right. It's difficult to fly, and staying afloat in a single spot is severely taxing from a mana consumption point of view. It's completely unrealistic to attempt that sort of attack."

"...So, what's the point?"

"Are you aware that there was an experiment to produce hot water with magic?"

A common defensive tactic in castle defense is to throw boiling water onto the enemy. Simply throwing rocks might be simpler, but unlike rocks, boiling water can't be blocked by shields or armor. It may not sound like much, but boiling water is extremely dangerous. Death from massive burns as a result of being covered in boiling water isn't rare.

"Yes. If I recall it was a combination attack that relied upon the cooperation of a fire mage and a water mage. However, the result was that it was more efficient to have two fire mages attack on their own, I believe?"

"Yes. This was the same for fire and earth magic. There's far too much waste. Fire and wind were well matched, but it was still more efficient to have the mages attack separately."

"...What are you getting at?"

When creating boiling water, it's said that the best method is to heat ordinary water with fire magic. Because magic has an effective duration, if you substitute the ordinary water with magically created water, the water vanishes before it finishes boiling. In which case, it takes less time to just blast people with standard water spells.

"Fusion magic, compared to ordinary magic or higher-order magic like lightning, has its own unique effects. It is, however, extremely inefficient, which prevented its widespread adoption."

"...And your point?"

"I will finish with this question, but...you recall, Your Highness, when the Apostle of the Blade faced the Royal Guard?"

Paulette mentions this forbidden subject without a hint of unease.

"...Of course. I have never forgotten that day."

"A host in himself, a man worth a legion. In some ways these appellations are false. At the very least, the Royal Guard, who are the finest of the elite knights of this kingdom, are still not enough to form the core of an army on their own."

"Correct...there are things that only elite units are capable of doing, but quantity has a quality all its own. At least, I believed that until that day..."

The Sword and Shield Companies... They are the symbols of the Royal House's authority and a presence to be reckoned with. Further, if they were

to fight in equal numbers, the Royal Guard could easily defeat the elites of any of the Four Great Houses.

At least within the Arcana Kingdom, no one believed there was a force capable of besting them.

"Lightning Slasher...!"

"In that match, I learned that there are individuals who are beyond compare. Individuals who can even overwhelm armies."

Even elite units can't win against superior numbers. That's simple common sense. But that common sense doesn't apply to the man named Sansui Shirokuro. If he wished to do so, he could kill anyone, even the leader of a country, and no one could do anything about it.

"I cannot forgive Sepaeda, or that man...that is what I feel, in truth."

"In him, I saw an ideal. No doubt you felt the same. You wished for a 'greatest' like him."

"Fine, yes...I once thought 'the greatest swordsman' was a ridiculous appellation. Until I saw it in the flesh."

Truly someone who is worth a host, enough to be worth ten thousand soldiers.

"Yes...and we, the Royal Family, sought a man like that...and we continue to do so."

"...Allow me to get to the point."

A short time after witnessing House Sepaeda's ace, Caputo had secured a certain individual. They had secured, without anyone's knowledge, an individual who, while a complete contrast to Sansui, could also be considered an absolute force.

"Hypothetically, if you could choose between one hundred fully-trained mages, and a single mage with one hundred times the mana of an ordinary mage, which would you choose?"

"If I had to choose one or the other, I would choose one hundred fully-trained mages."

"Yes, I agree. If given a choice, one hundred fully-trained mages is a better one."

When using the term 'mage,' what is meant here isn't just someone who can cast spells. What is meant is an individual like the Regent, who is so skilled with magic that they need no other combat skills.

"A single mage with the mana of a hundred mages... They can only be in one place at a time. There is no one to relieve them so that they can rest. More importantly, they only have one life. A precious life that could be snuffed by a single errant arrow."

Given that they'd be deployed to a battlefield, there always exists the possibility that they'd be caught off-guard and die.

With the exception of the Magyan royal family's Spirit Summoning, even the greatest user of the Rare Arts is still, in the end, human. They die as easily as any other human being.

"Even if they can cast spells with one hundred times the magical power, no doubt a hundred mages could counter that. No doubt they would be powerful, but they would be difficult to use in battle. If you were to try to deploy such a mage in battle, you would have to guard them quite heavily."

"...Get to the point."

"However, just as you cannot defeat Master Sansui by assembling a thousand other swordsmen, there is something a mage with one hundred times the magic can do that the other mages cannot."

The conversation returns to its beginnings.

"Effective range. A mage with one hundred times the magic would have a range to match."

"...You don't mean..."

"Even if you assemble one hundred fully-trained mages, they cannot match the range of a mage with the mana of a hundred mages. Their spells simply wouldn't reach the single mage."

"Wait..."

"Still, even if they might have one hundred times the range, so long as they are on the same ground, no doubt one could still stab them from behind. Unless, of course, they're flying."

The failed experiment of magical attacks from the sky. What caused the failure was the fact that it was impossible to attack from beyond the enemy's range, because being at that distance meant they were out of the attacker's range as well. But the experiment, a mere theoretical curiosity, would become the ideal method of attack if the attacker had one hundred times the effective range of their enemy.

"House Caputo possesses one? A mage with the mana of a hundred mages?!"

There are many people in this world who have the mana necessary to cast magic spells. Because the potential population is so large, it's relatively easy to find talented users. However, even in that population, the chances of finding one with a hundred times the mana of the average mage is next to impossible.

"No, we do not."

Caputo's ace, Shouzo Kyoube... His nicknames are the "Scarred Fool" or the "Cursed Farmer." The possessor of the greatest amount of mana in the world, and wielder of all elements... The greatest 'mage' in this world.

"The mage we have assigned to defend our border fortress, Shouzo Kyoube, has the mana of over *ten thousand* fully trained mages."

Paulette offers a prayer.

The militia that had been trying to secure the lives of their families... It's not that they are without sin. They have taken a grave sin upon themselves when they chose to resort to conquering and pillaging their neighbors. But is that such a terrible crime? Does their sin, the sin of wanting to feed their starving families, mean they deserve whatever death now approaches them?

As they're tilled across the entire landscape, there will be nothing left of them to bury or mourn.

Chapter 2 — The Scarred Fool

Part 5 — Lightning Slasher

Roughly three years before the start of the Domino-Arcana War...

After the battle between Sansui Shirokuro and the Knight Commander, an arena near the royal palace was chosen for the skirmish between Sansui and the Royal Guard. The arena, the occasional site of martial demonstrations, was open only to those closely connected to the heads of the Four Great Houses. Paulette Caputo, as a daughter of the current head of House Caputo, was among the spectators.

"How, I wonder, does he remain so quiet?"

Despite the regret she felt over the situation, she couldn't help her curiosity when she noticed his lack of resignation or fear. The King had deployed the Sword and Shield Companies of the Royal Guard as though to say he cared neither about shame nor reputation. Sansui himself appeared only mildly troubled, even as he became the target of their collective rage. She was captivated by his calm.

"Do *not* hold back. Win," the lord emeritus of House Sepaeda ordered with a force scarcely fitting for one going into quiet retirement.

"Show them the martial authority of House Sepaeda as it moves forward with myself at its head."

The new lord of House Sepaeda showed no sign of holding back against the Royal Family, either.

"Go and win, Sansui," Douve, Sansui's direct employer, said while smirking.

"As you wish."

He still appeared troubled, but he nonetheless followed his orders. Facing the collected ranks of the Royal Guard, he drew his wooden sword and showed no fear.

"Sword Company, forward!"

"Shield Company, brace!"

A number of knights leapt forward, propelled by wind and fire. The remaining knights fell into formation with swords and spears, as though prepared to face an army. They prepared attack spells against a young man armed only with a wooden sword. In the face of such naked hostility, the young man made no effort to put up a false front, and simply moved into a middle stance, wooden sword in hand.

""""Red Carpet!""""

The spectator's seats were well protected, but even so, Paulette was overwhelmed by the sight before her.

Set alight by spells from multiple knights, the ground burned with an intensity that seemed to embody the rage of the Royal Guard. The flames were intense enough that everyone in the arena thought they would consume Sansui, who was dressed only in cloth and wearing woven sandals. However, there was no sign of him burning or suffering...

Everyone in the arena, spectators and Royal Guard alike, had lost sight of Sansui.

"He's vanished..."

"Stay alert!"

"He's likely not a mystic!"

"Means he won't be hiding in the flames!"

"He's either above the ground or under it."

"He defeated the Commander. Don't underestimate him!"

Each person swung their heads from side to side in an effort to find where he had gone in the burning arena.

Paulette had found him. The young man was floating with one foot on the pauldron of a raging Royal Guard.

Feather Step. This technique reduced weight and allowed its user a form of movement akin to floating. That meant he could stand in the blindspots of fully-armored knights, as they were wearing helmets that narrowed their lines of sight.

Once positioned there, he unflinchingly landed a Ki-Imbued slash down on the knight's head. Before that knight had fallen to the ground, Sansui had already moved on, hopping from shoulder to shoulder and landing blows on each of their heads.

"A-Above!"

"He's using us as stepping stones!"

"A cheap trick!"

Above their heads rather than in the sky... The quietness of Sansui's Immortal Arts, with Flash Step and Feather Step combined, allowed him to move without his opponents ever noticing. He made no noise with each movement, thus going entirely unheard and unfelt when stepping on a shoulder or head. It gave him an absolute advantage against a group of fully armored combatants.

"Hit us if you must, just hit him!"

"Yes! We're armored, he's not!"

The knights on the ground started yelling encouragement to the knights hovering above. They were the swords and shields of the Royal Family. They feared neither injury nor their companions' attacks.

But before the knights in the air could get off their spells, Sansui vanished again. The knights above, having lost their target, canceled their attacks. There was no way they could attack their allies if the enemy wasn't even there. As a knight in mid-air looked for the enemy, Sansui's palm blocked off the limited view they had of the battlefield.

Ki Wave: an attack that either shook up a living creature internally, or simply blasted them away. The blow concussed the knight, who lost their sense of direction and nearly lost consciousness in the process. They barely managed to retain their senses and slowly lowered their altitude.

The result of a fall wearing full armor was easy to understand. The knight did not mind dying; it was the damage to the comrades below that

they wanted to avoid. As they somehow managed a soft landing, they watched as their other companions began falling around them.

“Amazing...”

Paulette couldn't understand what was happening. However, she fully understood his intention as the knights began wafting down to the ground outside the battle arena. ‘Use the least possible amount of force necessary to defeat my opponents, in order to minimize harm to them.’ After she witnessed him charging into the ranks of the Royal Guard, taking them down with a single blow before moving on, that was the only conclusion she could draw.

“That's enough!”

The new lord of House Sepaeda put a stop to the fight. Most of the Royal Guard had already been knocked out or rendered unable to fight. In exchange, there was not so much as a burn mark on Sansui. All present realized that there was no point in continuing the fight. Even the Royal Family and the Royal Guard understood that truth.

“Aye!”

“Well done, Sansui. There is no further point to continuing. Is that not correct, Your Majesty?”

“...Yes, that is correct.”

Sansui responded immediately to the order to halt and appeared before his masters. It was a completely controlled strength. Despite battling a band of knights driven by bloodlust, he had subdued them with the minimum amount of force. Paulette was enthralled by his gentle way of battle, despite it being far from soul-stirring.

As though to lend support to her growing admiration, none of the Royal Guards, from the Knight Commander on down, had died. Indeed, none of them were even permanently injured. Yet, it appeared that not everyone approved of that style of fighting. A lightly equipped young man had torn through their shields and broke their swords. All that they had put their faith in had been overwhelmed and defeated in an afternoon. There was no way for the Royal Family to witness this and think well of him.

There was no reason for House Sepaeda to fear him, but equally true was that there was no reason for the other Four Great Houses not to fear House Sepaeda. The only thing that could be said of the display was that all of them, the Royal Family and the Great Houses, realized that there were individuals against whom no amount of quantity could possibly stand up to their quality.

Part 6 — Flood Damage

"I see...a swordsman able to overwhelm the Royal Guard."

"I understand if it's hard to believe. I didn't expect anyone to believe me."

"Not at all, milady. His Lordship mentioned it to me; perhaps more relevantly, the Knight Commander of the Royal Guard has resigned. I have no reason to doubt your words, milady."

Returning to the Caputo lands, Paulette excitedly describes her feelings to the marshal of the paladins. A young man who can overpower the entire Royal Guard... Still, Paulette's explanation makes the story easier to swallow.

"And I can understand how it's possible. A wielder of a quiet Rare Art like the one you described is no doubt capable of such a feat."

"Really?"

"While I believe it would still be difficult...based on his performance, no doubt his Rare Art is well matched against knights who wield magic."

Magic armor is relatively light and tough. However, it still hampers movement and, more importantly, restricts peripheral vision. It's not simply about one's own equipment. Equipment worn by their comrades would also hamper visibility.

"The sounds of magic, the noise of knights moving in armor, the din of shouted orders. In situations such as those, it would be extremely difficult to track a swordsman capable of moving soundlessly and hopping from shoulder to shoulder. It would be like fighting a dragonfly."

There is, of course, a large gap between what's possible and what's easy. To execute such tactics against a hundred well-trained knights, all burning with anger and wielding swords capable of inflicting lethal wounds with a glancing blow, as well as magical fire that can catch and spread, is not a simple matter. It requires an immense amount of skill. The boy might not be as young as he appears. The marshal, a man of the same generation as the Knight Commander, had his suspicions in that direction.

"Still, the more I hear, the more impressive this escort sounds."

"Yes! And he's so strong, but he didn't hurt anyone!"

"Hahah...indeed?"

"I'm sorry. I'm not trying to criticize what you do..."

"No, no. Your view is correct."

House Caputo is the only house among the Four Great Houses and Royal Family that carries a lineage of Rare Art use. Along with the cadet branches, they have numerous skilled mystics, while those seeking training in the Mystic Arts coalesced around them from both inside and outside the kingdom. Paulette was proud of that fact. She felt that she and her line, with their healing Arts, were true nobles, worthy of admiration. Yet, at the same time, she has mixed feelings about the existence of the paladins that protected them.

"The Mystic Arts are techniques for healing and for protection. However, like magic, depending on how it is used, it can be a tool of war. The spilling of blood for peacekeeping and defense is hardly rare."

"I can't bring myself to like that..."

"Hah! That is how it should be. There is not much future in a House Caputo whose main branch derives enjoyment from conflict."

It wasn't that paladins were driven by bloodlust, of course, but it was also true that they were still a presence that conflicted with her beliefs.

"Society can't function on ideals alone, but a world without ideals is a sad one. At the very least, I'm not the sort of man to stop considering these questions," the elderly knight, approaching retirement, gently explains to the girl.

"Every sword needs a scabbard. No doubt you were drawn to him because he has a scabbard of his own."

"Scabbard...but he used a wooden sword..."

"Even a wooden sword is enough to kill. Those with power often want to display it. They have the bad habit of looking for opportunities to display that power. Men like that are the most likely to make unfixable mistakes. But the man you describe controls himself and aims to be a loyal blade for his master. He tries to contain matters to the bare minimum necessary to carry out his orders and he stops the moment he is commanded to. No doubt you saw that part of him."

A sword should only be used when necessary. It's only another element of risk at any other time.

"A scabbard..."

"A power that can't be controlled is far too dangerous. Understanding the amount of power one wields and to use only the necessary power at the necessary time... That's what is important."

As the conversation winds through at House Caputo, several young paladins approach the marshal.

"We come bearing news! There was a flood in a nearby village, with all of the buildings washed away."

"Pardon?" the two ask in puzzlement.

There are no large rivers nearby, nor have there been any recent reports of large rainstorms. Fire or storm damage would have made sense, but a village washed away by a flood? That wasn't possible.

Arriving at the village in question, it really has been flooded. More accurately, the area around the village is covered in a massive amount of mud, as well as debris from washed-out buildings, that could only have been caused by a flood. It's impossible to know where the roads used to be.

"Fortunately, it appears that there were no deaths. However, many were injured...and the damage to their homes is catastrophic."

"My heart aches for these poor people."

"Still, this makes no sense. How did it flood?"

There had been nothing unusual on the journey here, and as a result it looked as though a storm had come down solely upon this village. A flood without any warning was even less plausible than smoke without a fire.

"Determining the cause is important, but the injured are the priority."

Mystic healing is nearly universal in scope and capacity. While it couldn't restore lost body parts, it could deal with things like fatigue from exposure. As a member of the main branch of House Caputo, Paulette fully intends to wield her healing art.

"The injured are over here."

"Thank you...oh?"

Paulette Caputo notices him. Among the injured laid out on a cloth spread over the sodden ground was a young man with black hair. He appears to be from the same people as the Young Master, and her eyes stop to linger on his foreign features.

Still, treating the injured and discovering the cause take precedence. She begins treating the injured, checking the state of the unconscious people and working with the paladins to treat them. As the process continues, they're able to ask a witness what transpired: the elderly man who serves as the village mayor.

"Oh, Lady Paulette...thank you for coming to our village."

"Not at all. This is our purpose, after all. Could you tell me what happened...?"

"Yes, well...I do not know if you will believe me, milady, but..."

The mayor points to the unconscious black-haired man.

"I do not remember it clearly, but it appears he is the cause."

"Huh?"

"It may sound like a dream, but...well, he appeared suddenly in the village and it seemed he was rather confused... He began rambling about candles and fans, going on and on without making much sense. He didn't seem to be a bad sort, however, so I took him to my house."

He then points to the location where his house must have once stood. A mud pit is all that remains.

"He's a rather cheerful and energetic man, so I was quite entertained...and when he asked if I could use magic, I decided to demonstrate."

With that the elderly mayor creates a small flame on his fingertip. It was a simple spell that even the children of the village could use.

"He was extremely excited to see that... And he happily declared that he'd try it himself."

"Well, the use of magic is normal enough. It's simple enough to teach a dedicated learner."

If you randomly gathered 1,000 people, 990 of them would be able to use magic. And of the remaining ten, maybe one could use the Mystic Arts. There is a great difference in rarity between magic and the Mystic Arts. The

marshal nodded at those words. The problem was that the connection between the current situation and that story remained still unclear.

"Which is why I taught him...the spell I just demonstrated..."

"Aaaaack!"

"At which point a pillar of flame, like a mage's attack spell, erupted from his fingertip..."

"Water! Waaateerrrrrrr!!"

"Evidently, he was hoping to erase it, because the fire went out and an enormous amount of water began flowing from his fingertip...and I can't remember anything past that."

Paulette and the marshal take another look around their surroundings. The muddy ground had suddenly dried up. That proved the water wasn't ordinary water, but magically created water. That, in turn, meant that a simple spell had caused a disaster, purely through volume of water and water pressure.

"...What do you think this means?"

"I do not know...however, if he is the cause, perhaps we should take him back to the estate?"

House Caputo might be a lineage principally comprised of mystics, but as one of the Four Great Houses, it did have mages in its service. They bring the man in question, still unconscious, into the manor for House Caputo's resident mage to examine. That didn't mean the mage could conduct a medical examination, but he did listen to an explanation while the man himself lay sleeping.

"So when he used a small spell to create fire it, instead, created a pillar of flame. Then, when trying to put out said fire, he sunk...no, swept away the village, with a flood?"

The explanation was scarcely believable.

"Yes. Although no doubt it is hard to believe."

"That's ridiculous..."

The reaction is understandable even after seeing the result, but it was the only explanation that fit the facts. Even a sudden storm wouldn't have caused that sort of damage.

"Destroying a village with water magic... It wouldn't be impossible if there were a substantial number of powerful water mages, but to do it alone..."

To simply destroy a village, it'd be easier to use fire magic. In fact, no magic would be necessary; just setting fire to the village with a torch would be enough. What would even be the point of destroying a modest village? It's a complete misuse of resources.

"I can't think of any mage who would go to that trouble."

"Lady Paulette and I are amateurs regarding magic. Could you explain why you consider it ridiculous?"

"Hrm, well, alright..."

At the request of the two mystics, the resident mage begins to explain, emitting a small flame from a fingertip. The flame itself is clearly larger than the one the mayor created earlier.

"As you can see, I've created fire...Assuming that he used the same spell, there is a difference based upon raw talent. Children who grow up to be great mages may sometimes create excessively large flames...and then, in a mild panic, create water to put it out."

"...That matches the current situation."

While there are four elements in magic, it's inefficient and difficult to learn multiple elements, but it's not impossible. The most basic spells, such as producing small flames, a little water, or a weak breeze, are possible for most mages, regardless of their chosen element.

"However... This time, it set a house on fire, then drowned a village in water."

"Yes. The scale is far too great. It may go without saying, but even wooden houses are never completely dried out, so while their timbers might char, it's difficult to actually set them on fire. It's different if you *intend* to set it on fire, but... Also, to destroy an entire village, that requires creating an enormous amount of water..."

"Based on your explanation, this is a talent far beyond a great mage. Why are you so upset?"

As the marshal points this out, the resident mage pales, as though hoping their hypothesis is wrong. It's definitely a reaction caused by fear.

"You seem to be operating under a misunderstanding... Please, think it through. Assuming this young man was using a minor light spell...and it was large enough to set fire to a house..."

"Yes? What's the conclusion?"

"That is his limit."

"...Limit? So he can't use spells greater than that?"

"No. He can't use spells *smaller* than that."

As the two mystics fall silent in shock, the mage continues to explain.

"Understand that the fire I produced is the smallest amount of magic I can wield. Now, there are a number of fools who will put up a front and try to produce a larger flame, but the amount of fire produced by that spell is generally the minimum, and is thus the foundation of controlling magic."

To put it simply, the smaller the flame produced from the fingertip, the more precise the control. However, since magic is generally used for attack spells, that level of fine control is usually unnecessary. A larger flame means the person contains more mana, making it an overall advantage.

But there is a limit.

"Whether fire or water, that's his floor. Meaning, in effect, he has no control over his magic."

"...Is it possible to confirm this?"

"Yes. If he's trying to make himself look impressive and creating an unusually large flame, then make him sustain it for some time. If he has an

enormous amount of mana, then he won't tire, even after an extended period of time."

Those who have tens, even hundreds of times more mana than the average individual, create effects tens and hundreds of times more powerful, even when using basic spells. And since that person is only using a basic spell, it should require no effort. If it's mere vain posturing, they will quickly be exhausted.

"He should wake soon, so let us try explaining the situation to him."

"Very well."

If the situation is as it seems...whether with malice or by accident, he did, in fact, destroy an entire village. While there was nearly no human cost, the physical damage was enormous. Even if House Caputo were to shoulder the entire expense of rebuilding, he would have to take some sort of punishment.

"Mm..."

The sleeping man wakes, glances around his surroundings, and immediately asks the obvious question.

"...Um, where am I?"

From his point of view, he's been brought to some place he doesn't recognize, and he's surrounded by people he doesn't know. His confusion is natural. However, the color begins to drain from his face. He's slowly remembering what he's done.

"Um...could it be that I caused a bit of a mess?"

After listening to a description of the damage, he cradles his head.

"Not only did I set fire to the mayor's house, but I sank the entire village?!"

"No, to be precise, you didn't sink the village so much as wash it away."

The water may have washed things away, but it was hardly water under the bridge. Evidently suffering from guilt, the man seems in quite a panic. He doesn't appear to be a bad man, at least.

"You have my sincere apologies! Are the villagers alright?"

"Yes. No one was killed. However, a good number were injured."

"I-I see...I need to go and apologize, then...not that an apology will make a difference."

As he scrunches his shoulders up in guilt, Paulette decides to treat him kindly, even though he must be a little older than her. There's so much they need to confirm about him.

"Why don't we step outside a moment?"

Because they might end up using large scale magic, Paulette suggests they go outside. The four of them are currently inside the manor, but thinking about it, they've brought a dangerous object onto the estate.

"Yes...I'm sorry."

The party exits the House Caputo manor, and, for the moment, chooses to go out into the garden. Fortunately, there's nothing around that would be

an issue if set on fire. After securing the surrounding area, they begin explaining the situation.

“Please listen carefully. We will have you do the same thing you did at the mayor’s house. We wish to see if your destruction of the village was intentional or accidental.”

“Sure. I mean, I understand!”

“Do understand that your magic is very dangerous, so please listen to our directions...”

“Alright, I’ll do it better than earlier! Fire, come forth!”

“W-Wait, listen to what I’m...”

“Gyaaaaaaaaah!”

The mayor’s story is thus completely reenacted. That is, in spite of putting little effort into his spell, a pillar of flame, one that even a powerful attack spell couldn’t produce, erupts from his fingertip. Then, despite not needing to reenact the next part, in a panic, he begins shaking his finger, as if to try to put out the fire. As such, instead of letting the flames leap harmlessly into the air, he begins swinging it all around him.



“Lady Paulette, behind me, please! Pride Wall!”

No matter how powerful the pillar of flame, it wasn't enough to break a mystical wall. The marshal's wall is enough to protect the resident mage and Paulette from the fire magic. As there was nothing else to burn, the fire only ends up scorching the dirt.

However...

“W-W-W-W-Wat-Wat-Water!”

After swinging the pillar of flame around, a few embers had landed on his body, lightly scorching him in the process. Panic deepening, he stops the fire magic and starts up with water magic. As such...

“Gaaaaaah!”

From the palm of his hand gushes forth an amount of water that dwarfs the pillar of flame. It is, in fact, enough water to wash away not just a single home, but an entire village. An impossible amount of water. And, in the blink of an eye, he's swallowed by his own magic...

He lies unconscious on the muddy, waterlogged ground.

“...There's no malice to him. If anything, he might be a bit...dim.”

Thanks to the wall, the three are unharmed. However, they stare in exasperation at the incredibly stupid sight before them. It's as if a monkey, spooked by fireworks it set off itself, went into a panic and dove headfirst into a shallow pond. At the resident mage's calm evaluation, the two mystics had no other response but silence.

No, rather Paulette, despite her exasperation, still manages to speak.

“Marshal...uncontrollable power is indeed frightening...”

“Lady Paulette, this was worse than I could have imagined.”

The man possessed such excessive mana that it could easily destroy him, and he combined it with a personality that embodied both lack of foresight and extreme carelessness.

The ‘Scarred Fool,’ Shouzo Kyoube, a man who continually behaves without thinking, despite possessing magic that would completely destroy him if used carelessly...

This was the moment that the extremely difficult to control ace of House Caputo came under Paulette's protection.

Part 7 — Quarantine

A black-haired man, who had demonstrated how and why the village was destroyed by reenacting parts that he hadn't needed to reenact... Having been knocked out a second time, he's been treated and left alone.

"He's extremely dangerous," the resident mage said with a look of exhaustion.

"Yes, we've realized that."

"As a specialist, we need you to work on solutions."

A picture is worth a thousand words. Having witnessed both his magic and his carelessness, the three are acutely aware of the danger he represents. None of them doubt that the man hardly has a malicious bone in his body. But that doesn't guarantee he's harmless. In fact, it makes the situation worse.

"Very well...let us assume he has one hundred...no, seeing the reality, one hundred times is too low. Even at the lowest possible end, he has over one thousand times the mana of any extant mage. A man like that is no longer an individual soldier or mage, but a strategic weapon. Indeed, he may be on the scale of the Eight Sacred Treasures."

There are no possible solutions to that. No one's ever imagined or considered how to handle a man with a thousand times the mana of even the greatest mages. Unfortunately, reality doesn't care about what's been imagined or considered. To attempt an analysis, the resident mage begins to explain.

"First, the primary advantage and danger of having a thousandfold mana capacity is in effective range and duration. He can single-handedly cast attack spells that are equal or greater than those cast by over a thousand skilled mages. But he also has one thousand times the effective range, something that over a thousand mages couldn't possibly match. If he casts a fireball spell that ordinarily reaches one hundred meters away, he can instead launch it over one hundred kilometers away."

"...One hundred kilometers?"

"He could very well reach a city in the neighboring kingdom..."

It's a distance that an individual...no, even a kingdom...couldn't produce, regardless of their efforts. It's simply impossible under the laws of magic.

"The threat comes from the fact that his accuracy isn't necessarily one thousand times greater. It's not possible to see one hundred kilometers away. Even a slight change in angle could throw the aim dozens of kilometers off. To put it another way...if he misses, a spell with the power of one thousand mages would fly one hundred kilometers in a random direction."

That was a terrifying thought. If he accidentally flung a spell at the capital, it could very well end up engulfed in a sea of flames. It's impossible to grasp the number of people that would kill.

"Meaning that he's an ace that, when we use him, we can't miss, or else."

"No, I mean that he's an ace that's completely unusable. As I mentioned earlier, the lower end of the estimate is one thousand times. It could very well be ten thousand times. Magic with that much range could very well set fire to a completely unrelated kingdom. Which means it can only be used from high in the sky or at a particularly steep angle."

"I understand what you mean by range. Now, about duration?"

The resident mage, as if in response to the marshal's question, produces a small clump of dirt on their palm. It's the creation of dirt, using earth magic.

"Like the fingertip lamp, this is a very basic earth element spell. Watch. You can see it disappearing, yes?"

With fire or wind magic, because fire and wind disperse naturally, it's hard to grasp their disappearance. However, it's different for earth and water magic. It's easy to visually understand that something is happening.

"Magically created water can't quench thirst, because it disappears in an instant. Magically created soil and water are both temporary. Depending on the amount of mana, they will disappear in time, or if the caster moves too far away from them. However, things created with his spells will last over one thousand times as long. For example, if he were to intentionally, rather than accidentally, create an enormous amount of water..."

"That water can flow into a completely unrelated lowland and cause flooding..."

A mage that's not too weak to use; rather, he's too strong. He represents an enormous problem, causing the three present to furrow their brows in thought.

"If there is one thing to note, it's that he shouldn't be brought inside a house or a city. Frankly, he should be quarantined."

"But that's..."

"If he were to use magic in a city, the tragedy of the village will simply repeat itself."

The scale of the destruction would be immense. In the worst case, countless people would die.

"You mean... We must detain him?"

"He's a criminal, one who destroyed an entire village. There's no reason not to detain him. Still, if we try to detain him in the wrong fashion, he might try to break free with magic. So, to prevent that, we must quarantine him. Send him to live in a place with no other people around, and make certain he does not approach any population centers."

This isn't a solution Paulette is happy with, but she herself had seen his carelessness. To expect him not to act foolishly is itself too optimistic, and a form of arrogance.

"Very well. Marshal, please prepare a hut for him to live in."

"Understood."

"Master Mage, please prepare a list of potential situations."

"Yes, milady."

Frankly, the best solution might very well be to kill him while he was unconscious. However, the man with one thousand times the mana of an ordinary mage had a certain 'magic' of his own. That is, if they could somehow control him, he would become an absolute power that could defeat anything thrown at them.

Just as House Sepaeda had acquired the greatest swordsman, House Caputo could acquire the greatest mage.

"To force him to live so far away from civilization, all alone..."

House Caputo's territory is substantial, and the Arcana Kingdom's population density isn't particularly high. As such, there are plenty of open grasslands that have no particular value and aren't near any trade routes. In one such grassland, the man's hut goes up in a hurry. It's almost a form of exile. They're currently keeping a man, whose only sin is possessing too much mana, in exile.

Paulette finds herself caught up in self-loathing, gazing out at the landscape as the carriage heading toward Shouzo's home moves further and further away from civilization.

"Not to worry, Lady Paulette. We have stocked the cabin with essentials. He is a man old enough to be living on his own. We have explained the situation to him. I doubt there is an issue."

"As a measure to keep him from committing any further crimes, I believe this is the right choice."

The marshal and the resident mage riding in the carriage with Paulette try to calm her. They need to be careful in how they handle him. To avoid the worst case, where they might need to kill him, they need to teach him restraint. That he can't control his magic is unavoidable, but he needs to learn to control himself as a person.

"...Errm. Do you hear an odd noise?"

Rattling inside the carriage, Paulette thinks she can hear the sound of fragile things breaking underfoot. The other two hear the noise as well.

"Yes...it's a noise we sometimes hear when marching in winter...like we're stepping on frosted-over land."

"...Isn't it a bit cold?"

The three of them couldn't avoid a sense of foreboding.

"Driver! Hurry!"

"Yes, sir!"

The marshal commands his subordinate, who's driving the carriage, to pick up the pace. They should be getting close enough to see his cabin...which means they're within the effective distance of a spell he may have accidentally triggered.

"C-Cold..."

"Lady Paulette, your jacket."

"Ridiculous... Ice magic is an advanced school...to cast that in such a wide radius?"

It's possible the entire surrounding area had been frozen at some point. Frost that smells of ice magic is thickly distributed along the ground and the air itself.

Eventually... The carriage reaches the cabin at the center of the cold. Seconds might be valuable. The three hurriedly step onto the frozen ground, charging into the cabin.

"Graah!"

The marshal breaks through the door that's been frozen shut, charging inside. There, in the middle of the room, a figure sat unmoving, as though frozen to its very core, finger still outstretched as it sat.

It's so cool to be able to live in a cabin like this~!

Thanks for building this especially for me~!

I like this sort of rustic life~!

I'm in another world~!

I'm able to use powerful magic, right~~!

Okay! Since the three from yesterday are about to come visit, I'll practice my magic for a bit!

"Remarkable, to use a spell that even I, a resident mage of a noble house, find difficult!"

"Ahh. For such a talent to appear in front of me..."

"Wonderful! Come serve my house!"

That would be awesome if that happened~~~!

Alright, since it's a little hot, let's try a spell to make things cooler.

Since they mentioned you can cast ice spells once you master water, a little practice should do it!

"Br-Brrrr..."

"You froze this entire area with that poorly reasoned idea..."

Fortunately, having succeeded in reviving him, the three could only muster troubled laughter. It was fortunate that the advanced form of water magic was ice magic. No doubt, had he tried to raise the temperature, he would have reduced this entire area, himself included, to ash.

"One thousand times really does seem too conservative..."

Boiling water with fire magic leaves behind hot water, even after the duration of the fire spell ends. Meaning, when blanketing an area with ice, the low temperature lingers even after the ice disappears.

"We were able to heal you to some extent with the Mystic Arts, but..."

"Thank you sooo much..."

"Why did you do something so reckless...?"

"Well uh...I thought, maybe...you'd think better of me..."

Evidently, he felt he had done nothing but stack up failures, one on top of the other. As such, the only solution he saw was to secretly train so he

wouldn't fail again. With his positive, tenacious attitude, the man continued piling up even more failures. Sadly, he lacked any ability to learn from his mistakes.

"Well, I mean... Seems I'm really bad at controlling magic, so I thought it'd be a problem if I didn't practice..."

"It's not something you can fix with practice! I told you not to use magic without our permission!"

As a mystic, magic is outside of Paulette's expertise. However, a specialist said it's impossible, which means that he nearly killed himself trying something that's impossible by the ordinary rules of magic. What an absolutely ridiculous situation.

"I see. It seems you didn't understand the fine details."

The resident mage once again realizes he's dealing with a complete beginner.

"You, what's your name?"

"Kyoube Shouzo."

"Kyoubeshouzo, I see."

He decides to explain anew for Shouzo as he sits there shivering in a wool blanket, feet warming in a foot bath.

"Listen closely. Your mana is far greater than is ordinarily possible. Which means you're incapable of fine control."

"Doesn't that mean I'm bad at control...?"

"You're not bad at it. It's simply impossible. You're not capable of creating magic effects smaller than the pillar of fire you created yesterday. It matters not whether it's fire, water, wind, or earth."

"Huh?! Does that mean..."

'Gya-Gyaaaah!'

'W-What's with this man? He just blew away my most powerful fire spell with a fire spell of his own!'

'I've never seen magic that powerful. How does the spell even work?!'

'All I did was light a small flame with my fingertip. Get it? It means your attack spells are inferior to my lamp spell.'

"...Right?"

"Well, I suppose that's mostly accurate..."

How does he interpret everything so positively? The three can't understand his mindset. Did drowning and freezing himself with his own magic make him stupider? They don't want to believe that this is what he's always been like.

"At any rate, you're unable to cast spells weaker than that."

"So, I can use attack spells that are stronger than that?!"

"Do you intend to turn this country to ash?"

"Huh?"

It's useless. He's not getting it. There appears to be no doubt in his mind that his spells don't impact the world around him.

"You seem to be operating under a misunderstanding... If, heaven forbid, you were to cast a destructive spell with a large area of effect, you and half of this kingdom would go up in flames."

"This kingdom's that small?"

"No! The effect area and duration of your magic are just that broken! Who, indeed, do you even plan to fight?! You don't need that much firepower to kill people. Whether fortresses or great cities, your power could obliterate them with ease."

"...There's nothing like monsters or demons?"

"At the very least, I've never seen them."

Magic is generally designed according to military needs. As such, fire magic need only be hot enough to kill human beings, after which the emphasis is on area of effect. Mages only use advanced heat magic when facing mystical defenses, but that's still only magic intended to kill a single target. That means that using magic at one thousand times the ordinary power is beyond even war.

"Oh no..."

"Anyway, you must not learn attack spells, at this particular moment. Understood?"

"Yes..."

He looks deflated, but it's questionable as to whether it's actually gotten through to him.

"...Regardless, I'm glad to see you're alright."

Paulette reaffirms her belief that the man before her isn't evil. He's just an average man with average dreams of heroism. She finds herself wanting to find some way to allow him to live in human society. Without any doubt to that hope, she takes his shaking hand.

"I brought you stew and bread. For today, once you've eaten that, perhaps you could lay down and rest. I'm afraid I don't have much time, and cannot stay for long..."

"Sniff...thank you..."

Because of the effort required to revive him, it's almost time for her to leave. While they have yet to accomplish anything, the three present don't have much time to spare.

"We will come see you again. Please rest quietly."

"Okay..."

The day visit ends with reviving and feeding him. Rattling about in the carriage ride home, the three discuss how to proceed.

"We should place guards to protect and watch him. For his sake, as well."

"Yes. Leaving him alone there was a mistake."

The marshal's view is unassailable. Paulette agrees wholeheartedly. Protecting him is a dangerous assignment, but leaving him there is simply a recipe for disaster. Unfortunately, the rebuilding efforts with the village are

taking up vital resources, but people need to be assigned once that's settled.

"However, without a certain level of skill in the Mystic Arts, they will simply fall victim to his spells."

"I leave the selection to you."

"We should place a hex artist with them," the resident mage puts in, adding an inhumane suggestion to the marshal's proposal.

It means treating Shouzo as an exceedingly dangerous criminal.

"You plan to curse him and restrict his actions with that curse?"

"That is my proposal. I had underestimated him."

The resident mage continues to feel nothing but exasperation at an opponent who is so far out of the ordinary that it's impossible to muster anything approaching envy. The resident mage himself is here due to a certain amount of talent and effort.

In spite of this, the newly arrived Shouzo possesses power vastly superior to the mage. So far superior that there's no possibility of keeping up. Which means that, while he's not *entirely* devoid of negative motivations, he also genuinely feels that it's a necessary measure.

"Lady Paulette, Shouzo not only has an enormous amount of mana, but he's extremely good at manipulating it. It's ordinarily impossible for someone to want to lower the temperature and use that motivation to come up with ice magic on their own. If he only had an average mage's mana, he'd have been treated as a genius-level mage."

People can't simply act as they think. While there is the issue of not being able to properly conceive of the necessary movements, it's common for bodies not to react properly to the commands given.

Magic is the same way. Ordinarily, it takes tremendous effort to manipulate mana exactly as desired.

"But his power and effect area aren't normal. Because he's so easily capable of executing spells, he's more likely to simply destroy both himself and those around him. He has no need to practice. He is already the ultimate mage, and this is his limit. He has no room to grow."

It's unfortunate for a man so forward-looking, but there's no 'forward' or 'up' or 'further' for him to go. He's already complete. An 'ultimate' too perfect to fix.

"That is...tragic."

Paladins who have to use their healing abilities to fight...even more tragic is the man with power who can't even fight, only destroy. And a power that can't create anything worthwhile for the future? He himself is currently still optimistic, but how will he react when faced with that reality?

"Which is why we need to restrain him with hex magic. It will hold him back psychologically, and it also serves as a solution of last resort. What do you think will happen if he tries to fly using wind or fire magic?"

Flying with magic is very difficult, requiring fine control and coming with a substantial amount of risk. There's only a handful of people with that

amount of skill. Frankly, even being able to do so is a mark of a first-class mage.

"First, all the surrounding buildings will be blasted away by the air pressure."

An ordinary mage must put a substantial amount of effort into generating enough airflow to produce lift. However, Shouzo doesn't have that limitation. He creates far too much wind to lift a single person. Instead, the excessive magical force, even with the weakest spell, would not only lift him, but blow away the buildings around him.

"Further, it's possible he would lose consciousness from the rapid acceleration or rapid braking that occasionally happens with fire magic."

Enormous speed and the burden it places on the body... His body couldn't stand the burden his magic would impose. He may be able to increase his endurance if he trained his body, but even then there's a limit.

"He'll get launched into the air unconscious, then be carried away by the air currents and crash. He would land somewhere far away from the location he tried to set off from. In which case... Unless a large tree breaks his fall, or he lands in a particularly deep lake from not too high an altitude, he'll die."

"So we need a hex artist for him to avoid that fate..."

Unlike weapons, it is truly impossible to throttle magical power. It's possible to improve output with things like magic staves, but magic is still essentially the wielder's own power. To restrain a powerful mage, it requires preventing them from casting spells at all. Which is why, in such a situation, the power of a hex artist is called for.

"Yes. If things continue the way they are, he will simply use magic again and destroy himself."

The two could not deny the resident mage's words. There's nothing to back up any counterargument. However, in the end, it turned out that his words were prophetic.

"Heard someone fell out of the sky."

"Did a wind mage screw up?"

"Evidently he hit some tree branches, and then landed in a lake below."

"Because there was a big splash, they found him and were able to treat him. So he's still alive somehow. Still unconscious, though."

The three returned to the city, where that particular incident was already the subject of discussion.

"Please secure a hex artist. As quickly as possible."

Part 8 — Foolishly Naïve

"Which means, Shouzo, that you can't cast what you call 'healing magic.'"

"I see!"

Why am I doing this? the House Caputo resident mage thinks to himself as he teaches the grown man — realistically, the adolescent — in front of him the basic tenets of magic. Shouzo can't read, but they're still able to communicate, and while he has terrible manners, he's not so clueless as not to know about tableware or outhouses. It seems he's not *that* seriously ignorant.

At the same time, he's hopelessly careless and hopelessly unthinking.

"Oh, I see~~ Well that's too bad... Think I remember hearing old games used to be like that, though."

"Meaning you can only use absurdly-scaled attack magic. Understand that first and foremost."

In truth, the content of the lessons and the pupil's lack of self-awareness aren't particularly out of the ordinary. The resident mage, who is not only skilled with magic but also has some pretensions toward being an intellectual, is familiar with dim-witted men like the man before him.

Paulette Caputo, on the other hand, is likely unfamiliar with just how dim those people can be. However, in society at large, these sorts of fools tend to be more common than not. In that sense, Shouzo is, perhaps, not as bad as most.

At the very least, Shouzo is aware that he's not very bright. There are plenty of people in the world who steadfastly refuse to admit when they're wrong and, when faced with correction, become stubborn and combative.

"I see~~."

After being treated with the Mystic Arts, he was left with scars all over his body. His injuries were at such a level where he could very well have died or suffered permanent disabilities. However, since he suffered the injuries in Caputo lands, which boast the greatest concentration of healing skill in the kingdom, the scars are the worst he'll have to deal with.

"Whoa, these are some sick scars!"

There are multiple scars from where the branches had pierced his skin, including on his face, but that was still Shouzo's first reaction to seeing the result. Paulette, who had just finished treating his wounds, suddenly found all the tension draining from her at the remark.

"So, when should I actually use my magic?"

"...A war, probably. But there aren't any plans for one."

Currently, the neighboring country is in the midst of a civil war, and there's no guarantee it won't spread here.

However, probably best not to tell him that, the mage thinks, drawing his own conclusion as to the likely result.

"....."

He looks disappointed, but at least he's not so thoughtless as to be disappointed that there won't be a war for him to fight. Unfortunately, he still appears to be searching for something that he can do.

"So, what sort of books influenced you?"

"Huh?"

Shouzo directs an honestly surprised look to the mage. He appears perplexed that the mage knew exactly what he was thinking.

"Hardly surprising. There are an absurd number of books where authors who know nothing about magic write entertainingly about magical feats. A good number of people seek to learn magic because of those books. In that sense, there's nothing wrong with those books."

Childhood dreams are nothing to scoff at. It's not rare for even the most distinguished researchers to have started on their path after reading a particularly entertaining children's story.

"So, what sort of books influenced you?"

"Well... Ones where the hero is awesome!"

While he hesitates briefly, as though in embarrassment, evidently a part of him also wants to talk about it, and he continues.

"The hero, who had been just your average Joe, is taken to a new world and learns to use magic. The magic they can use casually is actually really powerful, and everyone praises them for it. Over and over!"

One saving grace, both for House Caputo and Shouzo himself, was that the heroes Shouzo admires are actually just average, ordinary heroes. Were he instead drawn to antiheroes with chips on their shoulders and resentment directed toward the world, no doubt he wouldn't have survived very long.

"The hero saves someone who happens to be a really important person, and that person starts really valuing the hero! The hero gets a new house and he starts keeping a bunch of cute girls there!"

It's a hero story that's common even in this world. No doubt it's not a specific work, but a set of tropes that's found in multiple works.

"As the hero enjoys his new life, lots of people come to the hero for help. They all say that they need the hero's power, so please help them! So they set off on adventures, where the hero meets new people, acquires new powers, and becomes even more powerful. More people come to him for help and he gets more and more important."

Not that his taste is immune from criticism. There probably isn't any specific knowledge about magic in his homeland. There'd be no way he wouldn't have already known about his enormous mana, nor would they have let him leave his home country.

"Which is why I want to learn how to do a lot of things!"

He's excited and full of hopes. He's likely putting himself in the hero's place.

"Considering that you were helped by a potential heir to one of the Four Great Houses, Lady Paulette, given a place to live and, most importantly,

had your accidental but complete destruction of a village taken care of for you, I doubt you'll be able to do that for a while."

"W-Well... That's why...I want to learn various new magics and..."

"No need. You're this world's most powerful mage. Even if one appeared with the Eight Sacred Treasures, they still wouldn't come close to you."

"That's it! If I had one of those Scared Treasures, I bet I'd...you know..."

"You don't need an amplifier. You need restraints. There's nothing like that among the Sacred Treasures."

The Sacred Sword Eckesachs can amplify the wielder's magic. However, if Shouzo were to acquire that, the result would be calamitous. Given that there's no way to make good use of him now, what would the point be of making him more powerful?

"Aww, darn~~"

"New powers, hm...? No doubt that, in the stories, new powers are desirable. And in a sense, that's about acquiring things that are missing for that individual. But...you don't need new power. In fact, such an event would just be a complete waste."

The only thing that's kept him from being permanently injured is how quickly the Mystic Arts can heal injuries. It's possible that he simply doesn't grasp the scale of the various disasters he's caused. But that's not simply just limited to him. Can anyone truly comprehend just what he represents?

"If there's something lacking in you, that's forethought and self-reflection... You need to first understand just what you're capable of doing right now."

"Right...now?"

"Yes. You talk about helping people in trouble so casually, but do you actually have a grasp of what you're capable of doing?"

"But, you know, I'm not allowed to practice, right?"

"If you do exactly as I say, we can change that. Lady Paulette's given me authority over the use of your magic."

At the moment, only Shouzo and the resident mage are in the cabin. Yet, standing guard outside the cabin are four extremely serious paladins who have made their peace with death. Without exaggeration, they were now guarding the Arcana Kingdom from the world's most powerful mage. If bandits attacked the cabin and forced Shouzo to use his attack magic, Shouzo and the bandits wouldn't be close to the only victims of what resulted.

Having accepted this confidential mission in the name of protecting the kingdom, the paladins recommit to their mission after witnessing him practice.

"Fortunately, it appears he's been behaving himself since the last incident."

"Yes, quite a relief."

Shouzo, who is so lacking in inherent learning ability that he seems to have exchanged all of it for his magical talents, has been well-behaved since his unceremonious flight accident. Well-behaved in this case means that he's restricted his magic use to the practice methods directed by the resident mage.

"We're fortunate that he's so naïve..."

"Yes. His personality is his saving grace..."

For example, if he fully understood his magic and what he was truly capable of, he could use that to negotiate with them. If he learned of his abilities, and if he had the intelligence to make use of them, he could become a powerful trump card indeed. After understanding his character...kill him if he's truly dangerous; if he's lustful, then provide him with women; if he's vain, then provide him with glory.

However, he's not yet at that stage. He's very much a child who has just learned to use magic.

"And, given how foolish he is, he is not in any place to be manipulated... It provides an opportunity to reflect on my own weakness."

"Indeed... This is perhaps an odd way to put it, but he is not, at least, an evil man."

The thing that keeps Shouzo alive, despite the fact that he destroyed a village and is capable of threatening the kingdom itself, is the simple fact that it would be easy to kill him whenever needed. It would be extremely simple: let him use his magic and destroy himself, then leave him. He's likely to simply perish from self-inflicted wounds.

Currently he's controllable, and not only is he easy to kill, but by simply leaving him alone, he's likely to just end up dead. That means that it's fine to simply leave him for now and help him learn. There's no harm in waiting to make a decision.

"It certainly puts Master Sansui's own remarkable abilities into perspective. He is very much the opposite of Shouzo... In fact, I doubt they should be compared at all, but Master Sansui really is an impressive guardian."

"Indeed. A guardian that House Sepaeda can use without hesitation."

A guardian that can be trusted to watch over a younger sister... Shouzo is as far from that as can be imagined. In his case, it's necessary to put a guardian on *him* to protect from *his* magic.

"To think there is such an enormous difference between the most powerful swordsman and the most powerful mage...it's not something to be proud of, but there are times that I envy House Sepaeda."

"So long as it doesn't extend to outright covetousness, there's nothing wrong with it. It comes from a place of respect and admiration, after all. No doubt it simply puts his most desirable qualities into perspective."

"The most powerful' means just that: the one with the greatest amount of power. However, there is simply too much of a difference between the most powerful swordsman, Sansui, and the most powerful mage, Shouzo.

Frankly, an idiot who has no concept of the enormous power at his disposal is worse than an evil madman.

"However, no doubt that this is a test that God has provided House Caputo. For better or worse, the reason he survives is because he is in House Caputo's territory..."

"Indeed..."

"House Sepaeda trusts the world's most powerful swordsman. In that case, we must raise the world's most powerful mage."

House Sepaeda's ace is already complete, a perfect sword. That's to be envied. Envied in the extreme. In fact, it'd be nice to be able to exchange cards. However, there is no reason to dismiss the meeting with Shouzo. Moreover, that would be simple sloth. The only people in this kingdom who could raise him properly and make good use of him are the leaders of House Caputo. That is the message from God, and it's the only way to deal with the situation.

"Lady Paulette, you have a guest."

At the maid's words, Paulette and the marshal break into smiles. There is only one guest they've invited to this estate.

"The Saive hex artist has arrived, then?"

"No, Lady Paulette. It is your betrothed, Lord Canvus."

The two slump their shoulders in disappointment.

Canvus Caputo.

He is a distant relative of Paulette, and as such is a mystic himself and her betrothed. Handsome, capable both in study and battle, austere and serious. He is a man who appears perfect at a glance. Now, whether or not he's completely lacking in fault is another question entirely.

"It's been a while, Paulette. And Sir Marshal, it is good to see you doing so well."

"It has been a long time, Canvus. I'm happy to see that you're well."

"Lord Canvus, words of your deeds have come to us, too."

The two can't quite hide their disappointment, mainly because they were waiting for the hex artist that can restrain Shouzo. It's not that they think lightly of Canvus, but Shouzo's matter is a question of national security.

"A while... Yes, it's been a while since we've last met, Paulette."

Having no methods of instant communication, and living in the vast Caputo territories, the two don't have much opportunity to meet. This is hardly a matter limited to this particular pair, but how the couples deal with the situation is up to the individuals involved.

Paulette isn't bothered by the separation. Living at House Caputo's main estate, she frequently hears what her betrothed is doing, and she has faith that he is living a life worthy of a future son-in-law of the main branch of House Caputo. By way of contrast, Canvus finds the separation unbearable. The reality that he can't often see the face of the woman he will marry eats at him.

"Why didn't you come to my party the other evening? I was looking forward to seeing you!"

"I'm afraid I had an important issue to tend to."

"That's what I was told. We're both in positions of responsibility, and I'm not keen on mixing up my priorities, either. But why do I hear nothing about the supposed important issue? I did notice the destruction at the village, and I understand that rebuilding it is important, but that's not something that you need to direct yourself. At most, it should have been a matter of you issuing the orders, then confirming they were being followed."

Canvus's frustration is perfectly understandable. It's true that they are both in positions of responsibility, so making certain to prioritize the right issues was indeed important. However, he hadn't heard a word about this important incident, or about the incident in question being resolved. It's understandable if this were a situation involving another of the Great Houses, or even the Royal Family, where there's some distance between them and House Caputo, but to keep such an incident secret from a cadet branch of the family? That's too much.

"I'm sure there are things you can't write about. That's why I came to see you."

"I...I see..."

There's nothing for her to feel guilty about, and she's not saying anything particularly out of the ordinary. Still, Paulette could only look contrite and glance away from him. The reality is so ridiculous that she doesn't think he'd believe it.

"Haha! The joys of youth. But not to worry; the cadet branches will be informed of the matter by House Caputo soon enough."

The wisdom of age... The marshal has decided to make the issue somewhat larger than it currently is. Once there's enough space to explain the situation, he plans to tell most of the important figures in House Caputo's orbit about Shouzo, or maybe even have him conduct a demonstration. For better or for worse he's extremely flashy. If he shows his strength as a mage with the power of one thousand mages, it'll be impossible to miss his absurdity. That should at least be easier to explain than the Young Master was for House Sepaeda.

"So, the information is being concealed? That the information is so confidential that you can't tell even me?"

"That's right, Canvus. With a bit more time, though, I think we'll be able to tell not just you, but the rest of House Caputo as well."

An individual mage with one thousand times the mana of the average mage isn't something that's believable when simply described in the abstract. Even if they explain to Canvus that they've secured an incredibly powerful mage, it would absolutely be insufficient as an explanation.

"But believe me, we're not doing anything that will be a problem for House Caputo or the Arcana Kingdom."

"...Is it so important that you can't just tell me right now?"

"Yes... I simply can't."

If they told him the truth, he'd demand confirmation, which would then become a matter of life and death. Not just his life, but on a scale that could threaten the kingdom itself. If he ordered Shouzo to use attack magic, and if Shouzo were to do as he asked, it might kill countless people in the process.

The real problem, of course, is that Shouzo wouldn't hesitate to demonstrate his magic. At the very least, they want to wait until they can hire a hex artist and put some restrictions on Shouzo's actions, before ultimately revealing him to other people.

"I promise it's something you'll understand when you see it. Please just wait a little longer."

"...Fine. If you insist, I'll let it go. But please understand that I'm simply worried about you."

It seems that the marshal, whom he admires, is involved, so it can't be a matter that's too big of an issue. With that understanding, Canvus decides to back down.

"Yes... Thank you, Canvus."

Paulette relaxes. At the very least, the man in front of her seems to understand. Keeping Shouzo around is enough of a risk with no guarantee of safety as it is. She'd prefer to avoid any additional complications. Watching Canvus depart, the pair relax.

The truth is, they've done nothing to be ashamed of. It's just a small matter that has a substantial element of danger, because it's still much too early to judge whether to keep or discard Shouzo.

"Lord Canvus, I have my report."

"And?"

"We're told that, in fact, Lady Paulette and her immediate retainers have been acting oddly of late."

However, there's one critical misunderstanding at play. That is to say, they've fundamentally misunderstood Canvus Caputo's thought process. From Paulette's point of view, Canvus is the man she will eventually marry. She admires him and has no particular complaints about him.

However, Canvus has a different perception of Paulette. To him, Paulette is the ideal woman, perfect in looks, personality, and demeanor. He is completely smitten with her. As such, it's perfectly natural for him to feel insecure and dig around when the woman he's in love with is hiding something from him.

"Specifically?"

"It seems not only did she treat a mage that failed an attempt at flight magic, but she then moved him to a different location so that he could rest."

Mages failing and crashing in attempted flights weren't particularly rare. In fact, most mages were likely to crash several times in the course of their careers when flying. They might crash by accelerating too much and being unable to stop in time, or by using too much mana while in the air, or

even by going too far up and suffering from oxygen deprivation. It's a dangerous world, accessible only to a chosen few.

"Hrm..."

Canvus isn't a mage who conducts flight training, but rather a mystic who treats mages who crash during flight. Still, his understanding is that a mage conducting flight training is a particularly promising individual. The question is, why did they have to move the mage to a different location?

"...Perhaps he's afflicted with a particularly virulent disease?"

"So far as we can tell, there were no special steps taken regarding the linens and cloth used for treatment..."

The most probable explanation was an illness. A particularly virulent illness like a plague. Her response would make sense, to some extent, in that case. Still, whether or not that'll be advantageous to House Caputo is another matter, and it doesn't make sense that she'd hide it, not simply from the common people, but from him as well. The fact that she's so skilled and intelligent, combined with the established trust between them, makes her actions so hard to accept.

"However, that mage is evidently a young adult male..."

"...I see."

He feels a brief flash of shame at the thoroughly implausible possibility that flashes through his head. At the very least, she herself couldn't do it alone, and there's no way the marshal of the paladins would cooperate with such a thing.

Even if Paulette were to get carried away out of love, he'd have to put a stop to it, as such a situation would not be to the benefit of House Caputo. And that would mean he suspects her, and that he doubts her sincerity. But Canvus himself finds his thoughts getting lost in a maze of his own making.

"Then all there is to do is see for myself."

He can't shake the feeling of unease and wants to be rid of it. Despite promising that he'd trust her and wait, the young Canvus couldn't resist. As a result, he winds up taking his horse to the single most dangerous place in the kingdom.

"Master! What should I practice first?!"

"We'll start you off with some ice. But only in the place I specify, understood?"

Shouzo is itching to try using magic. Not only that, but trying to prevent him from using it entirely is much more likely to make him run away or start practicing without permission than actually keep anything from happening. To keep those nightmare scenarios from coming to pass, the House Mage has decided to let him do a little spellcasting.

Of course, simply leaving it entirely up to Shouzo's discretion is just courting disaster, so he has very carefully instructed him on the use of that magic. Fortunately, Shouzo's magic is extremely stable. While the power, scale, and range of the spells often don't line up with his intentions, the direction and properties of the spell are exactly what he imagines. At a

minimum, his spells don't fly east when he aims to the west, nor does he produce water when he's aiming for fire.

"I planted flags outside; do you see them?"

"Yessir! I see four of them!"

"Fill the area between them with ice."

Filling a hundred meter square with ice... Ordinarily that would be a request so demanding that it could only happen with thousands — even tens of thousands — of mages. Which also means that it's the perfect way to measure Shouzo's power and, most importantly, there isn't any risk of injury to anyone, even in the event of 'success.'

"A'right... Freeze!"

The Mage shakes his head at Shouzo's extremely haphazard way of casting, but then sucks in a breath at the display that has unfolded before him. A block of ice appears in the blink of an eye, entirely filling the space.

"Whoa, awesome... But lemme see, is it actually between the flags?"

The paladins watching from behind stare in shock. The sight before them isn't one that seems within the realm of human ability. A hundred square meters of land is instantly filled with a block of ice about two meters in height. Had there been any people inside, they would have been flash-frozen, even with mystical defenses. Indeed, Shouzo has done that to himself in the past.

"Woo! It's actually inside the flags!"

Having gone to check the results of his magic, Shouzo innocently celebrates that he's managed to use his magic 'successfully' for the first time.

Successful use of magic... Well, Shouzo did create a block of ice 'inside the four flags' without getting caught up in the spell and hurting himself. The block of ice itself is a sculpted piece of 'cut' ice, with dimensions so uniform that it is, quite literally, a block.

"That's awesome! I'm awesome!"

As Shouzo celebrates, the House Mage, empathizing with him for the first time, just numbly takes in the sheer precision of the spell. This is more than enough to prove the effectiveness of Shouzo's magic. So long as the specified area is large enough and the element is one of the higher elements, it's perfectly capable of being used in battle. Moreover, Shouzo himself shows no sign of fatigue. The spell was only a 'light' application of his abilities, and he's more than capable of repeating it.

"Mm, yes... But..."

"Oh, I have an idea, Master! I could create lots of ice from my fingertips! Then I can pass the chunks of ice out on a hot day! By the time the ice melts, it'll vanish, leaving no mess! That's pretty cool, right?!"

"...Give it a try."

Trying ice magic at the lowest possible size... Even if he fails, all that'll happen is that he freezes himself, so the Mage assents surprisingly quickly. Soon after, Shouzo produces a relatively large block of ice from his

fingertip, which tumbles down onto the ground. It's a little small to be called a pillar of ice, exactly, but it's certainly large enough to help cool down a room.

"Hmm, I suppose you could pass those out at a park in the summer."

"Woo! Oh, another idea! How about I create hot water with my magic, too, and make a hot spring..."

"Take time and *think*. You were able to keep the scale small and under control because that was *ice* magic. If you tried to do that with *water*, you'd end up flooding the entire area and creating a brand-new lake. Besides..."

The 'smaller' ice block on the ground slowly vanishes, fading away as the spell's duration elapses. However, the giant block of ice is still there.

"Sure, your spells have a very long duration. But they still don't last long unless they're relatively large-scale spells. If you plan to fill a bath you'd have to make it last for several hours. And...wait a moment."

Higher elements have a small effective area, which is why Shouzo had been able to limit the ice spell to 'just' this size. If the current spell had been a water spell, then it would have summoned a giant pillar of water that could have very well reached the heavens and created a massive amount of damage 'downstream.'

After thinking those implications through, the Mage recalls an old concept: experiments involving fusion magic, also known as blended magic.

"Try this. Produce dirt from your right index finger and water from your left index finger. It only needs to exist for a moment."

"Okay, sure."

Thinking back on it, notwithstanding the desire to faithfully recreate the original events, they probably shouldn't have made Shouzo produce fire from his hand in the first place. A person reacts completely differently to creating fire from their finger as opposed to water. Since the only result of messing up with water magic is potentially drowning, they should have started him out with either earth or water magic instead of fire.

"...Huh?"

The results were as expected. Copious amounts of dirt flowed out of his right index finger, while a flood of water streamed out of his left. The amount, however, was substantially smaller than when he cast a water spell by itself.

"...I see. As expected. No matter how extraordinary your mana, you're still bound by the same laws of magic as the rest of us."

An idea common to magic users was that a single individual should only focus on a single type of magic. Magic, as a general rule, is made up entirely of 'attack spells,' and the targeted person dies whether you chop them up with air blades or burn them with fireballs. Learning multiple schools of magic is thus considered extremely inefficient. The amount of effort required to learn multiple schools vastly exceeds the potential returns. Past practitioners had already confirmed this to be the case.

"What's happening here, exactly?"

"If you'll stop, I'll explain it to you."

Water and dirt pool around their feet. Expression puzzled as the two elements mix into a pool of mud, Shouzo obeys the House Mage's instructions.

"As an example, there are spells that produce multiple fireballs."

"Really?"

"Don't even think about it! Don't *ever* try it! Do you understand me?!"

"You don't need to yell..."

"Think about your past actions before you say that...anyway, there are spells that produce multiple fireballs. But there aren't spells that simultaneously create both a fireball and a ball of water. The reason for that is because, when a single individual uses multiple elements at once, the spell is weakened to the point of being useless."

As a demonstration, the House Mage attempts to produce water and dirt from his fingertips. But he only manages a small mist of water and a small dusting of dirt. Even accounting for the bare minimum of mana being used, it's still much too weak. Difficult to consider that outcome anything close to a success.

"When a single mage uses two elements, the effect of the spell isn't halved, but falls to less than a quarter produced when using a single element. For three, it's less than an eighth, and for four, it's less than one-sixteenth."

The history books record that one mage made it their life's work to prove this effect.

"So, if I were to use all four elements at once, maybe I could..."

"Yes, it would depend on how you did it, of course, but..."

"Could I fly?"

"No. Give up on that."

It's not something that any magic user would attempt under normal circumstances, but in Shouzo's case there's a very pressing need to waste all of his excess mana in order to create spells with limited power or area of effect. This might be the easiest way to get 'usable spells' out of him.

"Besides, in the end, even blended spells are mostly attack spells. Still, try not to use them at all. If you absolutely must use magic, then cast spells that produce water or dirt in front of the knights. Don't ever use anything related to fire or wind."

"Okay!" Shouzo chirps in reply, smiling happily.

"...Why can't I trust that answer?"

Yet for some reason, the paladins guarding him and the House Mage teaching him aren't reassured by the sound of his voice.

"Thank you. I'm so glad you were here."

Just how many people in the world ever hear those words? Or for that matter, just how healthy is it to hear those words more than once?

For example, a world-class doctor working himself to the point of collapsing and, as a result, receiving the gratitude of his patients...would he himself, and those around him, regard him as happy and fulfilled? No one could say for certain. However, what *is* certain is that he would suffer from pressure and time constraints that no ordinary person could understand.

But, putting aside such 'rare' examples, perhaps it's natural for people to want to hear other people tell them that something 'couldn't be done without you' or that they're 'glad you're here.'

The desire for appreciation, acceptance, and reputation... To want to live a life that's widely admired as special, and thus contribute meaningfully to society... Those wants are, in some sense, a sign of a healthy state of mind.

"Welp, I'm sure making progress!"

Perhaps the most critical reason that Shouzo hasn't been disposed of yet is that he's pretty much a normal person. It's clear that he's still immature and lacking in self-awareness, but he's also honest to a fault, without any hidden motives, and thus easy to understand. At least, that's how House Caputo regards him.

If, instead, he had some recognition of the sheer power at his disposal, was able to fully make use of it, and started making demands of House Caputo, then voices within the house would have recommended attacking him in his sleep and disposing of him. The fact that he's completely incompetent is why they don't regard him as enough of a threat to kill. His moral values are easy enough to understand, and don't require any clear correction. While there are limits, of course, a certain lack of competence can be a decent way to navigate life.

"I'm sure looking forward to tomorrow!"

At the very least, a man who says 'I left the countryside to try to make something of myself' is a lot more realistic and relatable than a man who says 'I spent five hundred years practicing sword swings in the mountains.'

He tries to listen to instructions, so it's still much too early to kill him. However, the paladins who have seen Shouzo's magic are well aware of the weight of their responsibility. That is, they're aware that they're responsible for managing a weapon of mass destruction, the likes of which are heretofore unseen in this world. While he's currently crammed inside a roughly constructed cabin, he remains an extremely dangerous individual who could destroy anything he put his mind to. Hence, their need to protect him from everyone and everything. They're strongly convinced of the importance of that task.

"...Huh?"

However, the paladins guarding Shouzo are completely surprised to see Canvus approaching with his small retinue of knights. Up until this moment, Shouzo's existence has been kept secret from everyone but a handful of people, meaning that Canvus shouldn't know of Shouzo's existence at all.

"Hm. Paladins?"

"Y-Yes. We've been tasked to protect this cabin."

Those with mana can recognize others who possess mana, and as a result, can also recognize those who lack it. Similarly, those with the Holy Power required by the Mystic Arts can recognize others with that same power. Moreover, the distinct equipment carried by House Caputo's paladins helps identify the warriors around the cabin.

"...The mage Paulette healed is inside this cabin, yes?"

"I-Indeed, milord."

"However, we are only to allow those who Lady Paulette has specified beyond this door."

The paladins are well acquainted with Canvus. Indeed, the retainers around Canvus himself are paladins, as well, which means they can't just brush him off or even contemplate using force. At the same time, they're not confident that they can properly convey just how much of a danger the man in the cabin represents. Sadly for them, the cabin itself is not remotely soundproof.

"Huh, a guest?"

Not particularly surprised by the visitors, Shouzo opens the door and sticks his head out.

Caught off guard at the sheer normalcy of the action, the guards offer nothing in response.

"You're the mage...?"

He's certainly covered in scars. While prompt and correct healing has avoided leaving Shouzo with any permanent disabilities, the scars remain as constant reminders of the injuries he'd sustained, especially on his face. These particular injuries are rather common among mages who fall from a high altitude; at least, those mages fortunate enough to land on something like a building and somehow avoid death in the process.

"Huh? No, no, I'm still just an apprentice," Shouzo responds with an unguarded laugh, evidently unable to recognize the hostility behind Canvus's remarks. He doesn't seem even a little tense.

This response draws the ire of Canvus's retinue. He certainly looks the part of a yokel, but even factoring in that ignorance, it doesn't excuse the disrespect.

"You, how dare you speak to Lord Canvus in such a tone!"

"You have no grounds to complain if you're struck down for your disrespect!"

However, the ones who'll suffer the most in that particular scenario are those paladins presently serving as Shouzo's guards. They'd prefer to avoid any unnecessary escalation, as they have no idea what might happen as a result.

"P-Please, we beg for your mercy! This man has no social graces or common sense! He's ignorant and unthinking!"

"He's in no shape to receive civilized company! Please, come back at another time!"

Frankly, it's Canvus who's decided to ignore common sense here. The very act of going to see someone Paulette has taken the effort to quarantine is absurd on its face. Even if he's frustrated by the welcome he receives, he's the one who came uninvited, so it's his own fault. While Canvus's retinue are themselves offended out of their loyalty to their master, Canvus himself seems aware of the wrongness of the situation and, dismounting, turns to face Shouzo.

"I say this, knowing I may open myself to ridicule, but I am Paulette's betrothed."

"...Huh? Wait, are you maybe misinterpreting the fact that Lady Paulette comes here pretty regularly as something else entirely?" Shouzo says half jokingly, punctuating his remark with a chuckle.

Those around the two no longer have any way of stopping the confrontation.

"That's right. Bluntly, I'm envious of you. So much so that I suspect you and Paulette have a relationship of a nature that you cannot mention."

Ordinarily it would be unthinkable for a fairly competent individual to receive this much special treatment. No matter how talented a mage he might be, spiriting away a man with no common sense or shame, as well as evidently little in the way of brains, and putting a permanent guard on him seems...excessive. It's certainly not something that a member of House Caputo's main branch would ever do under normal circumstances. If anything, it's asking too much *not* to suspect that there's a different motive behind Shouzo's treatment.

"Y-You have the wrong idea! This man is, well..."

"Yes, he's extremely dangerous!"

Even stating the bald truth is difficult to do when it's so difficult to make it sound believable. For Shouzo's guards, the inevitable outcome if things continue on this course is painfully obvious. The only question is which of them will end up dead.

"Even so, I understand my suspicions are base and uncouth. It isn't impossible that you're simply an ignorant rube, placed here until you learn the ways of the world. Moreover, the Paulette *I* know would never do anything untoward."

Canvus is far from acting rationally, at this point. His mind understands just how problematic his actions are, and that his suspicions themselves are an insult to Paulette. Yet, even then, he can't manage to contain his anger. The object of his total devotion is taking time away from him to carefully nurse this man back to health.

"Which is why I simply cannot leave. Now that I have seen your face, I have to go as far as this can go."

"Huh?"

"I challenge you to a duel!"

"What the hell is this guy saying?!"

The guards around him couldn't help but nod in complete agreement with Shouzo's honest opinion. How did it come to this?

Part 9 — Certain Victory

"Canvus is truly making his way to Shouzo's cabin?"

"Yes, milady. It appears we missed each other on the road there."

Paulette, the Marshal, and the House Mage have hurriedly piled into the carriage and are on their way to the cabin. The situation demands a quick response, as a single second's delay could result in calamity.

"Why did this happen...?"

"If I had to name a cause, it would definitely be youth..."

Canvus must have understood the situation on a rational level. Even if Paulette herself had lost herself entirely to youthful love, there would be no way the Marshal would have helped her cover it up, which means there must be some important reason behind the situation. However, people lose any semblance of rationality when it comes to matters of the heart. At the very least, Canvus is that type of man.

"It may have developed into a duel by now."

"Whyever for?!"

"That is how some men are. Because they love someone...they will inevitably cause problems, regardless of their beloved's intentions."

"That's just idiotic!"

Yes, but that's what some men are like. They confuse a bit of kindness for romantic interest in them. They get irritated when the woman they're in love with has a friendly chat with another man. Such thoughts are, in one sense, very primitive. The path walked by these men is, in a very real sense, the path of the idiot, and idiots by their very nature always cause problems.

"But I was only acting out of concern for Shouzo..."

"Even that leads to suspicion... Setting that aside, as an amateur, there was something I couldn't quite accept."

The Marshal, seeking any reassuring topic he can find on this stressful journey, turns to the House Mage.

"If producing a flame from the fingertip is the minimum effort possible, magically speaking, are you certain there's no way to adjust the output from there?"

"It's impossible. It would go against the laws of magic."

With that, the House Mage scrunches his face into a bitter mien and begins to explain.

"Mana levels are essentially ink and pen tips."

"What does that mean?"

"Having a high mana level means one has a lot of ink and a wide pen tip. Casting spells is then equivalent to drawing pictures and writing letters."

"So, with a wide pen tip, you can't draw small details or tiny letters."

It's an abstract example, and the Marshal struggles to grasp it. Of course, grasping it doesn't result in any reassurance on his end.

“Let us say that you write down ‘ball of fire’ on a piece of paper. If the tip of your pen is unusually wide, say the width of a paintbrush, you would need a large piece of paper to be able to fit ‘ball of fire’ at all.”

“And the size of that sheet of paper represents the scale of the spell?”

“Yes. And in his case, his pen tip isn’t the size of a paintbrush, but more like a brush bigger than he is. Meaning that, for him to produce flame from the tip of his finger, is roughly equivalent to him using that ludicrously huge brush tip to write on a regular piece of paper. If he wants to cast any sort of actual spell — that is, draw anything with detail or write anything legible... He’d have to find a sheet of paper bigger than he is, at least the size of a building, to use as his canvas.”

Which means that, if he wants to use any sort of ‘actual spell,’ the scale of the destruction ends up being equally massive as a result.

“As he said one time, if he fights a mage, all he has to do is emit flame from his fingertip to wipe out his opponent’s spell. But when fighting a mystic like Lord Canvas, well, a mystic has some ability to hold that magic back.”

Indeed, when he produced flames the other day during practice, the Marshal used his Mystic Arts to block the flames with a wall of light. That is, so long as he limited himself to just producing flames from his fingertips, it was possible to block those with mysticism. But, because his flame had been blocked by the mystic barrier, Shouzo would, in turn, try to break that barrier. He would use stronger and stronger magic in an attempt to get through it.

“If he used heat or lightning magic... The spell would go straight through everything in its path. We’re not likely to escape unscathed, even at the distance we’re at out here.”

Ordinarily, the effective area of higher elemental spells is limited. Even with a substantial range, the effective area is restricted to a single point. However, like with the example of the pen, in Shouzo’s case, the ‘point’ is well over a thousand times the size of most ‘points.’ It would depend on the direction and angle, but if he were to try that...anything would be possible.

“If he feels the need to break through a mystical wall, then it’s likely to result in the worst possible outcome.”

Of course, none of the three in the carriage nor the driver think that Canvas has any chance of winning. That’s because the Mystic Arts specialize in healing and defense. Putting it simply, the only method of attack Canvas would have in a duel would be to approach and slash with his sword. Even if he were to approach, he’d have to do so after readying his equipment for the encounter. Which means that, unless the encounter began within the arc of a sword, in which case it would be completely tilted in Canvas’s favor, Shouzo would have at least two or three opportunities to use magic.

A man who could destroy an entire kingdom with a single spell would get to fire off *two or three*...

"Marshal, let us heal the horses as they run, that way..."

"I have already issued those instructions. We must stop them before the duel begins..."

Before they could do anything, they needed to get there. But once there, how would they stop it?

The old warrior was struggling to come to a conclusive answer. A mystic couldn't possibly defeat Shouzo. Even if he explained that reality, he wasn't certain that Canvus, driven to his actions by masculine pride, would back down.

"Um... Mister Guards, was what I just did really *that* stupid?"

"No, it's not that bad..."

"In this case, I believe it's Lord Canvus who's out of control."

Shouzo couldn't shake the feeling that maybe he'd done something wrong again, but he was still unable to fully grasp the situation. For example, if he had gotten extremely sick and had Paulette look after him, alone, all night, he would be able to understand the suspicion. But since she had always been accompanied by the Marshal and the House Mage, so no matter his own intentions, there was never an opening to do anything untoward. Yet, he still found himself in this situation...

"Alllll-righty. I was worried I did something again."

"Uhm, which is why I was wondering... Do you plan to accept his challenge?"

"We'd prefer if you wouldn't..."

"I won't start a fight, but I'll finish it!"

The guards begin seriously considering whether they should just kill the idiot in front of them. They do, in fact, have permission to do so, should the worst-case scenario arise. There isn't any question in their minds when weighing the safety of the realm and the kingdom itself against the life of a single foreign man.

"I've always loved these kinds of scenarios! It's exciting!"

It's hard to tell what sort of stories he enjoys reading, but surely they're not remotely the same as the current situation. A story with this sort of scenario couldn't possibly be any fun to read.

"I salute you for your courage! Even if the cause of this duel is pathetic and immature, poorly thought-out and foolish, the duel itself will be a holy contest, worthy of honor!"

Canvus himself recognizes that his cause is pathetic, immature, short-tempered, and idiotic, but yet he's already pledged his faith to this duel. As a religious man, there was no way left to call off the duel.

"We will be surrounded by walls of light! In addition, flying out of the range of the opponent's blade is forbidden! No one will enter or leave this area until the issue is settled!"

"Alllll-right!"

Ordinarily, this was to prevent interference from outside, or to prevent one of the combatants electing to flee.

At the very least, once closed in by thick walls of light, even a heat or lightning mage couldn't easily run away. Canvus's retainers surround an area ten meters square with walls of light. Being in the middle of an open plain, there's no room for foul play.

"I'll say this ahead of time, but the men responsible for the wall are elites who report directly to me. No matter how skilled in magic you may be, breaking their walls will be no easy feat."

"Oh, gotcha..."

He's not bright, but he's extremely honest and unquestioning. That trait is clearly working out in the worst possible way, this time. The entire time, Shouzo's guardians wanted to yell out loudly that Canvus was absolutely, unquestionably wrong. There's no way that a single wall of light created by a single mystic could possibly stand up to this man.

"So it's okay if I use whatever magic I want in here!"

"Exactly!"

No, that's wrong. It's not okay at all. You can't believe what he's telling you. It's not that he's wrong, exactly, it's just that the ordinary rules don't apply to you, Shouzo.

"Hold! Hold a moment!"

As the guardians watch anxiously, a group of potential saviors arrive. For better or for worse, and perhaps too late to be of use, Paulette's party arrives just as the pair are enclosed by the walls of light.

"Canvus, just what in heaven's name are you doing?" Paulette yells out at Canvus, her voice bordering on a scream.

Frankly, he doesn't appear to realize that he's one wrong move away from turning the kingdom into a burning cinder. If it came to that, not only would everyone present die, but the damage would extend far beyond their own lives.

"Forgive me... In the end I couldn't believe in you."

"The fault lies with me. If I wanted you to believe me, I should have told you the entire truth! Even if I didn't expect you to believe me! So, please, stop this duel at once!"

Or at least, even in the case of a duel, if it was simply a hand-to-hand brawl, that would be fine. The issue is letting Shouzo use magic.

"I will state this without holding anything back: he is a mage far beyond the realm of the ordinary! He is the ultimate mage, one who can break through you and your retainers' mystic walls like they're paper!"

"Heh, thanks for the compliment."

"...I cannot afford to back down after your statement. ...Forgive me."

There is a major gap in understanding at work here. 'Far beyond the realm of the ordinary' is accurate, to be sure but there's an enormous gap between Canvus's mental image of an extraordinary mage and the reality of

Shouzo's power. A gap large enough, in this case, to destroy an entire kingdom.

"Forgive me for wanting to fight and prove your words wrong!"

"Well, I don't really get it, but okay!"

"Shouzo, please stop this! Surely you understand that your magic is..."

"Not to worry! I'll defeat your betrothed without hurting him!" Shouzo offers a confident grin from his scarred face and a thumbs up.

Seeing him smile reassuringly, as if to say there's nothing to worry about...those who truly understand his absurdity and lack of forethought only feel an absolute sense of dread.

"Leave it to me! I've got a plan that's certain of victory!"

"There's nothing reassuring about that!"

"It'll be fine! Just leave it to me!"

"What are we supposed to leave to you?!"

Despite talking through the wall of light, an even thicker wall exists between their understandings of the situation, and that wall also exists between Paulette's group and Canvus's group.

"Lady Paulette, I apologize, but this duel is already in the hands of the Lord."

"Indeed! We have no intention of allowing this wall to fail, even should the ground split open!"

"However great the mage, we will keep him contained!"

"Lord Marshal, even at your direct order, we will not open these walls!"

Paulette's truth had also hurt their pride. They had put their entire effort into reinforcing their walls in an attempt to prove that they were able to deal with any mage, no matter how powerful. Of course, all that effort is completely meaningless.

"As I keep trying to explain, that's not the question!"

"Lord Canvus, it is unacceptable to use God's name to settle a personal grievance!"

"Hey, Shouzo! Just stop! Don't you dare do anything!"

Paulette, the Lord Marshal, and the House Mage all let out cries of despair at the situation. But, unfortunately, those voices only make the situation worse.

"There is nothing left to say... Let us settle this before we're interrupted!"

"Alright! Let's go!"

The participants, having no recognition of the potential consequences of their actions, begin a battle that could very well decide the fate of the kingdom.

"All-righty, here we go!"

"I'll let you make the first move!"

"Don't let him go fiiiirst!"

"Don't let that man use magic!"

"In fact, just go ahead and kill him!"



If the Mystic Arts are the art of defense, then magic is the art of attack. Typically, when the two arts clash, the mystic has the advantage. That is because the only effective methods of breaking through mystical defenses are with heat or lightning magic. To put it a different way, those two types of magic are only useful when used against 'combat focused' mystics, a small group even among the already small population of mystics at large.

Further, heat and lightning have extremely small effective areas, meaning they need to be aimed carefully if they're to hit, unlike fire or wind magic. As in the case of the recently retired Thunder Knight, that a mage can use lightning or heat magic as their primary means of attack is a sign that they're an elite first-class mage.

By contrast, rare among the already uncommon mystics are the combat-focused mystics. Few in number, with a little training they're able to easily fight toe-to-toe with a mage. This is because they can create mystic walls, walls that can easily block magical wind or magical flames. Aside from rare exceptions like Sansui, combat is generally about exchanging damage with your opponent. If you don't take any damage yourself, you'll usually win, even with the use of relatively simple attacks.

However, this is limited to fighting opponents who fall within the limits of common sense. Shouzo is an opponent to whom common sense doesn't apply in any meaningful way. He's a man who wields magic that can destroy entire kingdoms without so much as a thought for the consequences.

"Here I go!"

Obviously, Canvas is not so dishonorable as to fight an opponent who can't fight back. Had Shouzo possessed any lingering disabilities from his previous injuries, he might well have unclenched his fist and backed down. However, he believes that Shouzo is at least a mage skilled enough in fire or wind magic to practice flight spells. He did consider the possibility that Shouzo might be able to use heat or lightning magic, and it was under those assumptions that he challenged Shouzo to a duel. Which is why he was oddly deflated, indeed dumbstruck, by his opponent's first spell.

"Water, come forth!"

An enormous amount of water floods from Shouzo's outstretched palm. The sheer volume is surprising, but more surprising is the unexpected use of water magic in the first place. There aren't many water-focused mages out there. It's not that they don't exist, exactly, but few use it for military purposes. Part of it comes from the lack of lethality manifest in water when compared to fire, but the primary reason is that water magic is primarily reactive. It's mostly used to create walls of water to defend against fire magic when there aren't any mystics available.

Of course, defending against fire magic can be done by using a fire or wind spell or similar strength, so while water magic can be useful when protecting a castle wall, it's not a common sight. And from a common-sense

standpoint, it's never going to be enough to break through a mystic's defensive wall.

"I didn't expect this amount of water... But, to think that he's a water mage..."

The sheer volume of water and the water pressure involved are, in fact, impressive. And it's certainly impressive that he can continue to flood the area with water instead of having it vanish after a short time. But that's all it is. Water magic, and even its more advanced ice variant, just can't breach mystic walls.

"But a duel is a duel. I can't afford to lose."

Canvus is fundamentally a serious man. It doesn't appear that the man in front of him is going easy on him, nor is he attempting to run away in a panic, so he has no intention of holding back, either.

Shouzo is continuing with his flood of water, but that won't last for long. While the water pressure keeps him from moving forward or releasing his wall of light, Canvus doesn't see any particular problem with his current situation. All he has to do is wait. That's what he thought, anyway, until he felt the chill of water around his ankles while clad in light, but still metal, armor.

"...What the?!"

It was impossible. Water magic and earth magic produced spells that simply hit the opponent and vanish, rather than flood or bury an entire area. As for what's happening, while it's true that the walls of light are creating a kind of seal, the ground underneath is still ordinary earth. It's not desert sand, so it would absorb a normal amount of water. This is why he was left dumbstruck at the water pooling up within the walled space.

"Good! Just as expected!"

Creating a pillar of flame when he expected a lighter flame, and creating a flood of water large enough to inundate a village when he meant to create a bucketful of water... The times Shouzo's magic had failed, it was because he had been surprised at the outcome. Put another way, the spells themselves worked fine, and the rest was a matter of familiarity. Once he was used to the spells, he wasn't going to panic, which means that all he needs to do is use the spell he originally used to wash away the entire village in a slow, controlled manner.

"What are you planning?!"

"As you can see, I'm dressed in normal clothes, while you've got a sword and armor. As the water level rises, it's pretty clear who's gonna drown first, isn't it?"

The water level continues to rise inside the space sealed in by walls of light. It sloshes upward, going from their knees up to their waists.

Of course, the wall created by Canvus is still there, but it's only deployed to block a single direction, not in all four directions to prevent the water from flowing in. Canvus can certainly swim for a bit in armor, if he must. However, he won't be able to float easily like his opponent, and he'd have

no choice but to concede defeat under those circumstances. He can't very well take off his armor, either. Taking off his armor in front of the enemy is as good as surrendering.

"That it would be this extreme..."

"There! Giving up yet? If you'll admit defeat, I can stop this spell!"

Shouzo has put some thought into his spell. It's not like he wants to kill the opponent in front of him, after all; if anything he'd like to avoid that, if at all possible. In that sense, he's made the appropriate choice. He's well aware from experience that water magic isn't particularly lethal; that is, it's psychologically easy to use. He can back his opponent into a corner without hurting them badly. At worst, they'll have a little trouble breathing. In that case, it won't require magic to save them, as even normal life-saving measures should be enough.

Unlike someone who shall remain nameless, he's not going to attack his opponent with a flame-wreathed magically enhanced legendary sword without meaning to kill his opponent. His objective is to win rather than kill. In that sense, the lethality of his spells is more a hindrance than an asset.

"My Master said it was important to consider what I could do with my current abilities."

The water level rises from waist to shoulder height. Canvus is a few inches taller, meaning that Shouzo will be engulfed by the water first, but that just means he needs to float a little. The duel was as good as won. However...there was a vital piece of information missing from his assumptions.

"T-This is nothing..."

"Release it already! Any more water and you'll still cause a disaster!"

It should go without saying, but the Mystic Arts are still an art wielded by people. Those people, in turn, are supporting the weight of an enormous volume of water. As Canvus is inside the walls, he only needs to deal with being submerged, but the paladins maintaining the walls have to hold up that entire weight, a weight that is increasing by the second.

Shouzo's assumption was that, due to the conditions of the duel, he didn't need to worry about the weight of the water, but there was, in fact, a limit to their capabilities. Had the paladins recognized the danger and released the water quickly, it would have simply been a rapid flood of water around their ankles. But, by this point, there's already an enormous amount of water inside the space...that is, an amount of water sufficient to wash away an entire village.

"B-But...the duel is still...Lord Canvus hasn't conceded defeat..."

"Pride is not enough reason for a paladin to give up their life! Can you state with certainty that dying here will be for the good of House Caputo and the Arcana Kingdom?"

The two inside will be fine, of course. Even if the walls do collapse, they'll just get carried along in the flood. But the paladin on the collapsing end won't be so lucky. They'll take the entire weight of the water at point

blank range. The pressure might differ based on the exact weight of the water, but regardless, it's more than enough to kill them.

"I have already sent Lady Paulette to safety in the cabin. And this wall is away from the cabin!"

"Which means I need to be the one to release it?!"

"Yes. If the other side collapses, it'll harm Lady Paulette!"

A paladin struggles to maintain the wall, sweating heavily as he does so. With no small amount of persuasion from his superior, he's about to interrupt the duel.

"I will create a wall to protect us in front of you! You may get wet, but you can avoid getting hit directly!"

"...Please forgive me, Lord Canvus!"

The four paladins are already at their limit. The burden has continued to grow, and it doesn't look like it's going down any time soon. It was a futile effort on their part. There was no possible way that a mere four mystics could hold in the magic of a thousand ordinary casters. It was then that the water, which had risen to Canvus's neck, shot out as a burst from the removed wall.

"I'd forgotten that I'm not a good swimmer."

"How foolish... Still, I can't blame you for your actions, this time."

In the end, the duel ended with the pair being washed 'downstream.' At the very least, Shouzo's plan hadn't been that problematic, given the circumstances, so no one was going to lecture him too harshly.

"Canvus."

"Yes, I know, Paulette."

"...I know you may not believe me, but Shouzo is a person with enormous amounts of mana. Bluntly, he may well have the mana of over a thousand normal people."

After being recovered, the pair were treated quickly, and are now receiving a lecture from Paulette inside the cabin. Obviously, none of them have any real injuries worth talking about. Shouzo and Canvus both successfully emerged without drowning, having only been washed away by the torrent of water. If there were any real victims in this situation, they'd have to be Canvus's retainers, who were now all suffering from extreme fatigue.

"I don't know how powerful you expected him to be, but the reality is certainly far beyond your expectations. I understand it's difficult to recognize without witnessing it in person..."

"Yes, you're right. In the end, I clung to my standards, instead of believing you."

Canvus had neglected Paulette out of his love for her. Even after believing her innocence, believing in the guarantees of the Lord Marshal, and then learning why she had kept him hidden, he still let his own wounded feelings determine his actions.

"When you arrived right before the duel, it just made me more determined to fight him. I was fixated on defeating him in front of you, even knowing that you're not the sort of woman to be impressed by that."

Fighting is a brutal occupation and necessary. At times, it even needs to take priority over prayers to God. Indeed, prayers to God may not even have any real meaning. Yet he had fallen in love with her precisely because she maintained her ideals in spite of the brutal violence of reality.

"I'm sorry. Not only did I doubt you, but in the process, I put the entire kingdom at risk."

"Yes, indeed. Putting aside your offenses against me, you should think carefully about how you endangered the realm."

At the very least, he should have trusted the words of the Marshal. Even if he had his doubts, he should have simply returned to his lands. If there had been no forthcoming information even then, he could have asked for an explanation.

"Of course, even if you thought he was a skilled mage, at most you would have considered him about the strength of ten ordinary mages..."

The kingdom and its surrounding cultures had an advanced knowledge of magic, which meant that its lower and upper limits were well understood. That was what prevented Canvus from acknowledging the risk of a mage with over a thousand times the mana of an ordinary mage.

"So, I'm a prodigy of unimaginable power, huh?"

"...There's nothing I can deny about that statement," the House Mage admits, even as he feels a bit of exasperation.

He's certainly a prodigy. Or, more accurately, a walking disaster. Individuals who can blow away a small kingdom by themselves just shouldn't exist.

"The most important fact of the matter is that you were right, and I was wrong."

"Yes, but the reality was simply too unusual. Even if you couldn't have ever believed me, I should have given you a better explanation."

The problem was that Shouzo was simply too much of an idiot. No one thought to cover for her doing something suspicious like hiding a man away in a remote cabin and attending to him frequently. To put it in Earth terms, they treated Shouzo like a small child who also happened to have a weapon of mass destruction's launch button and couldn't resist pushing it. Everyone thought he was simply too stupid, and thus didn't consider him a man in any meaningful sense. Otherwise, they were too close to Paulette, and felt there was no way she would be suspected of infidelity.

No, Canvus himself didn't doubt her faithfulness. It was simply that his own ugly failings couldn't accept another man getting close to her.

"I have no right to stand by your side."

"...You need not feel that much guilt. I am at fault for thinking you would not believe me."

"No, the reality is that I didn't believe you. Even seeing how seriously you were trying to convince me, and then seeing it for my own eyes, I still couldn't trust you. You were right. You were right to hide him, his personality included. I'm...worthless."

He put the kingdom at risk for the sake of his own jealousy. That alone would be an unforgivable sin. Of course, it might be argued that Shouzo, as the threat itself, shouldn't be allowed to live, either.

"I have no right to stand by your side."

"That's not true..."

"I leave the rest to you, Shouzo."

"Huh?"

Canvus Caputo, looking as though he was leaving behind a part of his youth, turned and left the cabin with his retinue in tow.

"Just what the heck is that dude on about? He doesn't seem to like listening, does he? I mean, Lady Paulette told him not to worry."

"I've got nothing to say, except that you're right..."

The Mage could only nod in agreement at the blunt honesty behind Shouzo's observation. Canvus certainly was a man who didn't bother checking his surroundings before charging in.

"Ahm... Could it be that he just called off our betrothal?"

"Lady Paulette... That is, given his personality, no doubt he will provide an official notification to that effect soon..."

"But there's no reason to!"

"Once the truth of Shouzo is revealed, there may be..."

Paulette had never had a problem with Canvus, but he had lathered himself up into a frenzy, judged himself unworthy as a result, and decided to abandon the engagement, all without Paulette's involvement. Paulette had no idea what to call the oddly empty feeling she now had in her chest.

Part 10 — Divine Punishment

The eastern edge of the Arcana Kingdom, House Caputo's territory:

Final preparations against the approaching invasion are underway at the fortress city that serves as the cornerstone to the kingdom's defense. The combatants, all aware that the day of battle they had long dreaded has come to pass, stand atop the fortress walls with tense expressions. Courageous knights are arrayed in formation, as the city's noncombatants hole up in their homes.

As the city's defenders and its residents undergo the obvious and necessary preparations for war, House Caputo's ace stands waiting for his orders.

"So it's finally come... The day I use my magic."

Dressed in thick robes that clearly mark him as a mage, the man stands gazing up at the sky, not so much steeling himself for battle, but rather deeply moved by the event.

"...Sir Shouzo, preparations are complete."

Behind him wait four young women, all wind mages of some skill.

"Our sentries have reported the enemy army approaching from over the horizon."

In addition, a paladin, shorn of her armor and helm, stands waiting nearby.

"Okay, understood."

He feels the hexes restraining him release their hold. There is now nothing to stop Shouzo from unleashing his magic.

"Alright, let's go."

The Scarred Fool indicates to his escorts that he's done with thinking. In response, the four wind mages cast their spells. The wind envelops all six of the individuals present, lifting them high into the air above the fortress city. The city, filled with the people they're tasked with defending, grows smaller as the enemy they're tasked with destroying comes into view below.

Maintaining an altitude where an individual person doesn't even appear as a point on the ground, the six move close enough to the army that the countless points gather into a recognizable mass.

"Such numbers..."

One of the wind mages is overwhelmed by the sight below. The strength of an entire country's army is invading with an objective no different than an average bandit gang. If the entire force manages to attack the fortress city, it's easy enough to imagine the outcome. Even if they had been an ordinary army, the fortress city was still likely to suffer immensely.

"...They are beyond our help."

The paladin could not help but pity the group below. They aren't fundamentally evil people, just driven by the need to make certain their families survive the winter. A need that can only be fulfilled by pillaging their neighbor.

“...Let’s do it.”

Shouzo had already thought the scenario through in his head multiple times. Why was he going to use magic against the group below? Are there any other options? Yet, simultaneously, he’s trying to put all that thinking aside.

“I’m Shouzo Kyoube, House Caputo’s ace...”

Shouzo is well aware that the people of Caputo have treated him well. That House Caputo, Paulette and beyond, are good, merciful people. Those people have ordered him to destroy the enemy. There’s no room for hesitation on his part, given their own moral struggles.

“The world’s greatest mage...!”

The paladin creates a shimmering wall of light in front of them. It’s not there to defend them from the army below. No, the wall is there to defend the group from the effects of Shouzo’s magic.

Noting the wall’s existence, Shouzo holds his hands out before him. The spell forms, not inside the wall of light, but far beyond it. With over a thousand times the mana of an ordinary mage, it’s possible to create a spell far from his hands.

“Create water and earth, then heat it with fire and contain it with wind...”

He combines all four elements simultaneously. Water and earth, on the scale of a large building, appear in the air, and with the help of burning flame and the containing wind, mix to become extremely high temperature mud.

“Look at the size of that thing...”

“So this is the Scarred Fool’s full-power attack spell!”

“Amazing doesn’t begin to describe it...”

“This isn’t a spell, this is a force of nature...”

Mages capable of flight must have both plentiful mana and precise control. Even if they are working as a group of four, the four mages, capable of flying while carrying two passengers, are clearly extraordinarily talented and well trained wind mages.

Those four are overwhelmed by the sheer heat that radiates from the spell, even through the wall of light. Compared to using a single element, a four-element fusion spell reduces the effectiveness of the magic to about one-sixteenth the scale. But when wielded by a mage with over ten thousand times the mana of the average mage, it’s still a sufficiently powerful attack spell to swallow an entire army.

“...Rain down.”

Shouzo, understanding the consequences of his actions, lets the enormous spell in front of him go.

“Hey, it’s supposed to come into view soon.”

“So, we finally get to fight!”

“Yep. Gotta grab a bunch of souvenirs.”

Humans are social animals. So long as their group can justify it, ordinary people can go from being individual peaceful civilians to forming a marauding, genocidal army, just to use an extreme example. All because their enemies are from a different country. Because they're the enemy. Because they're a different ethnicity. So long as they have one or two appropriately convincing reasons, ordinary people are easily capable of genocide.

"Ah, so we'll finally be able to have an easy life."

"Things were pretty bad until now."

"Cheers for the new leader!"

And they have a dream: to gain renown in this war and be rewarded for it. They could very well become nobles, and thus set their families up for a long time to come. They may have been hurriedly trained, but that training is sufficient. There's no possibility that they'd mistakenly hit their own allies with attack magic or accidentally heal their enemies. With such high-quality equipment, they're well prepared for battle.

Of course, good equipment doesn't automatically mean victory. The rebels originally had inferior equipment to the ancien regime's army and won, after all. However, it's ultimately true that equipment can provide an enormous advantage. If all of the soldiers in the army are equipped with weapons far superior to the enemy country's elite units, that provides more than enough advantage to offset any lack of experience.

Further, the defenders in the fortress city aren't all from elite units, or even fully trained. Overall, the Domino Empire's soldiers actually have an advantage in quality. In a sense, that's to be expected. The reason the Empire has gambled on an invasion is because they have a decent chance of winning. The Emperor has made clear that their invasion is just.

According to him, the Arcana Kingdom is prospering using the wealth plundered from Domino by the emigres of the ancien regime. And, in spite of his efforts to reclaim that wealth diplomatically, the Arcana Kingdom has refused all of his entreaties. That is why they must demonstrate the new Domino Empire's power.

"We're almost there!"

"Yep, let's do this!"

"Today we start a new chapter!"

Obviously, not all of them believe the Emperor's words. But the new leader has, indeed, given them new power. They no longer have to toil in the fields to grow wheat that they won't get to eat themselves. From here on, they'll be the victors, the ones doing the pillaging.

It was an objective truth that they are the world's greatest infantry. However, in the end they're still only the world's greatest *infantry*.

They're marching along the plains to their intended feeding grounds, the fortress city, when one of them gazes up and catches a glimpse of something in the sky.

"The hell is that?"

Those are the last words he ever utters.

The world's greatest mage conducts this world's first 'carpet bombing' upon the Domino Empire's army, unleashing magic from an altitude of several thousand feet, an altitude so high that regular people can scarcely breathe normally.

An enormous flood of mud, created with earth and water magic, compressed with wind magic to raise the boiling point, and heated well over a hundred degrees Celsius with fire magic, all combined with the kinetic energy acquired from being dropped from a high altitude, hits the army directly below.

There's no chance for any of them to survive. The area is flooded with high temperature steam and mud. Even if they avoid a direct hit, the heat alone is enough to boil the fully equipped soldiers alive.

"Ahhhhhhhh!"

No one had been looking at the sky. They had all been fixated on the sight in front of them, which is why they hadn't considered that there might be an enemy waiting above them. As such, most of the soldiers were convinced they'd been attacked from the flank.

This was because those directly underneath the flood had been buried under the fusillade of boiling mud and were crushed by it, thus being killed instantly, and those who survived the initial attack were being hit by the splatter. Even without that reality, that they had been suddenly engulfed by a mountain of boiling mud was hardly a situation that was easy for them to grasp.

With no knowledge of airplanes and bombers, it didn't ever occur to them that they might be attacked with magic from above. Further, they didn't have the mental bandwidth to consider the possibility. The armor they're wearing is of the highest quality, after all.

However, that equipment is designed with combat in mind, and is not protective attire specially created to protect from a massive flood of boiling water. It doesn't take a level of heat sufficient to melt steel in order to kill a human being. Indeed, regular boiling water is more than plenty. Suffering severe burns across most of one's skin is more than enough to be lethal.

"D-Dammit... What's going on?! Where's the enemy?!"

In the end, the Domino Army is really just a mob. It's certainly capable of fighting when it has the advantage, but once panic takes hold, it falls apart quickly. Morale is high, but discipline is low, and the individuals making up the army aren't used to thinking as a unit. Further, they're in Arcana as invaders. They're here to win, they're here to pillage. Were this a defensive war, where they were defending their families, the panic wouldn't immediately lead to outright flight.

"What the hell is going on...?"

"Dammit, dammit, dammit!"

They can't even grasp where the enemy might be. If they knew where the enemy was, they could have directed their hatred at them. However, there's no way to hate something you can't see or hear.

None of the platoon commanders, company commanders, or even the army's high command have any idea of what's going on. An enormous wall of mud has suddenly appeared in the middle of the army along with a lake of boiling water. There was no way that any of them could come up with the correct response.

"Stay calm! This is clearly an enemy attack!"

"First, calm the horses, then reorganize the formation!"

"It won't end here! There's another attack coming!"

Still, they struggle to restore order to the ranks, and then they attempt to prepare for the next attack. They know they're under attack, so they have to deal with that. They're here to invade another country, so a counterattack was expected. The commanders attempt to hold the army together under that logic...but even that ends in failure.

Eyeing the army from above, Shouzo prepares another major spell. This time it's an advanced water element spell: ice magic. Ordinarily, this spell fills an area with countless small pieces of ice and lowers the surrounding temperature. However, he's casting that spell with ten thousand times the mana it was designed for.

In effect, it creates an incredible number of absolutely enormous blocks of ice, and then drops them.

Giant chunks of hail rain down on the ground, which is still hot from the boiling mud. Ordinarily, this might be a particularly freak weather phenomenon, but this hailstorm falls from a cloudless sky. Each of the hailstones is large enough to kill someone below, making it obvious that it's another attack. There's clearly an enemy overhead.

"Are wind mages using ice magic scrolls?!"

Someone comes close to reality.

What might be a saving grace on the invading army's part is that the chunks of ice are really just giant bludgeons. They certainly do a lot of damage, but not so much that their magical armor and helmets, all of incredible quality, couldn't stand up to the blunt force. Unfortunately, the armor doesn't absorb enough of the impact to make it painless.

"Gaaaaah!"

"It hurts! IT HURTS!"

"We're going to die! We're all gonna die!"

Hailstones about half the size of a human head are coming down like rain. Even if they were sheltering in a fortress, the ice was still likely to punch through the roof and hit the people within. This hailstorm is happening not in a forest or in a city, but upon an open plain. The storm continues dropping ice at a nasty, but not lethal, pace. Reeling underneath it, they were no longer an army, but merely victims of a natural disaster.

There are some who try to protect from the hail by using their magic shields as shelter, but that's hardly enough to stop the onslaught. Under the unceasing shower of ice, those holding the shields have to stay up not for a short moment, but for a sustained period. Even if the shields hold up, the people holding them do not.

Even if each of the individual soldiers was as powerful as an accomplished mage, they had no means of responding, so long as the enemy above them hovered beyond the range of their spells. And even if there were any mages capable of flight, it wouldn't have been possible to avoid the constant salvos of hail and make it into the air. As such, their situation is not a matter of bad luck or misfortune. There are no probabilities involved in the outcome. By appearing on this battlefield opposite this enemy, they were guaranteed to die.

The war was lost the moment House Caputo perfected the use of Shouzo Kyoube, the greatest mage in the world. The equipment of the soldiers, the quality of the commanders, the tactics of the generals, and even luck...none of those things matter at all. Yes, this was all ordained. There is no infantry capable of defeating a high-altitude bomber.

It was all meaningless. Completely meaningless. They were all going to die. They became a faceless mob, a field of grass that existed simply to be scythed down. All of those present on this battlefield were going to die to the last soldier, with nothing left to identify them as individuals, or even when or how they died. There was no way to identify those things, nor any reason to do so.

All that Shouzo is there to do is to attack the area 'around' the enemy with enough force to inundate them in a way that leaves no survivors and no remains, as though he were 'plowing' the area. House Caputo's ace has made into reality the ideal dreamed of by generations of mages in this world, all of whom died in their efforts to create it.

"What in the heavens is *that*...?"

The House Caputo forces, arrayed in the fortress city with the expectation of fighting a defensive battle, stand staring in shock at the bombing happening far in the distance. Floods of mud and blocks of ice rain from the heavens, destroying the land itself and the enemy army along with it.

"Just what is that...?"

The only thing that comes to mind is God punishing the people below. That they're witnessing God meting out 'divine punishment.'

"...It's now heat — no, there's also lightning..."

Each blow has the power of an advanced elemental spell wielded by a great mage. Heat and lightning magic produce powerful spells with a small effective area that are usually difficult to see from afar. But because these spells have been fired in overwhelming numbers over a long period of time, they're clearly visible from a vast distance away.

Thousands of flashes of light scorch and tear apart the land. The magic demolishes the terrain, leaving no survivors or even remains. This enormous wave of destruction swallows everything in its way.

“Oh my...”

No words come to mind, even those of prayer. All of those witnessing the magic could only stare in shocked awe at the sight unfolding before them.

Chapter 3 — Instruction from the Master

Part 11 — Assembly

Perhaps it's a bit late to bring it up now, but learning magic takes a certain amount of time and money.

Even if the prospective student has both of those, only about ten in every thousand people can learn Rare Arts instead of magic. That means that, even if they're relatively wealthy and have the desire to learn, children who have potential in the Rare Arts are often unable to learn the Art suited to their talents. There isn't any established curriculum; further, there aren't any instructors. This does not necessarily apply to the Mystic Arts, but even Holy Power only manifests in about one in every thousand people. Those with other talents have little hope of finding a teacher.

This is a reality that the Regent has struggled with for ages. Her desire is to create a place where education for all children who desire to learn is possible.

"Hex Arts... U-Um, I-I'm still not fully trained as a hex artist, and I-I doubt there is anyone who'd want to learn them."

"Teach Spirit Summoning?! It's a secret technique, available only to the Royal Family!"

"The Immortal Arts take *at least* fifty years to learn..."

Zuger Saive, Magyan Sunae, me. Each of the three of us, all users of the Rare Arts, have our own reason for turning down the Regent's request. As each of the arguments are difficult to dispute, she has regretfully accepted our reasons.

While the Mystic Arts are one thing, being known for talent with Hex Arts is evidently a social stigma so awful that it makes it nearly impossible to continue living among regular people. I suppose that's understandable, since an Art that can turn liars into stone is a pretty scary thing to have. Moreover, the issue of Spirit Summoning is simply a matter of national security on her kingdom's part. Even if she were to teach it, if her kingdom ended up finding out about it, both she and her students would face certain death. Finally, the Immortal Arts simply take too long to learn. Fifty years in this world is about the average life expectancy for a newborn child.

"You wish for me to teach Shadow Summoning? Fine with me. In exchange, we would like you to have a few of your healers sent to my kingdom and teach the healing Arts there."

Tahlan has fully mastered his art, is certified to teach others, and uses an Art that doesn't require a great deal of secrecy. He has negotiated with the Regent and House Caputo, agreeing to find those children with Shadow Presence from among the upper classes, and teach them Shadow Summoning.

"Shadow Summoning, which uses Shadow Presence, is a technique to create shadow duplicates."

I'm currently sitting in on "A Shadow Summoning Lecture by Visiting Lecturer Tahlan," which is taking place in a classroom provided by the

academy. Currently, those in the room are the students Tahlan has identified as possessing Shadow Presence, as well as their parents, the Sepaeda and Batterabbe parties, and the teachers of the academy, including the Regent. It appears there's an academic interest in Rare Arts that were developed in foreign countries.

If Shadow Summoning can take root here in the academy, it's possible that Shadow Summoning could also proliferate across the entire kingdom. Of course, that also means that the Mystic Arts will make their way to their kingdom in turn.

"The clothes and armor you're currently wearing, in addition to the sword in your hand, are all recreated. This Art may not have the raw attack power of magic, but it's still a very combat-oriented...as they call it in this kingdom...Rare Art."

The students are listening to Tahlan's explanation with expressions of extreme concentration, while the parents seem worried that this might turn out to be a socially awkward Rare Art. No doubt that they know the existence of Hex Arts, and how hex artists are treated by society at large, means that they intend to keep their children from learning the Art if it ends up being too unusual.

"At first you will not be able to move them. You begin by creating a stationary shadow duplicate. Still, that is more than enough to serve as a decoy, and you can still use it as a shield. It will disappear after taking a certain amount of damage, but you can then make a new one."

'A combat-oriented Rare Art' is a fair description of Shadow Summoning. For example, if you use fire magic indoors, you're almost guaranteed to take damage yourself. While it depends on the scale of the spell, the injury might very well be mortal. Depending on the circumstances, highly lethal or wide-area spells could quickly become a hindrance. In that sense, Shadow Summoning is perhaps most effective in a restricted environment, though no doubt controlling the shadows can be difficult.

"However, perhaps the most effective use of it is in scouting. When using a long-distance controlled shadow, it's possible to move that shadow as though it's your own body, as far away as Shadow Presence and physical stamina allow. It's ideal for scouting and assassination. There is essentially no cost to failure."

The parents listening to the description look to be both disappointed and reassured. I suppose they would have preferred if Shadow Summoning was like the Mystic Arts, useful in both combat and in medicine. But, they also seem to be thinking it's not an Art like the hex arts that will be discriminated against. It's a sort of Art for bandits or ninjas, but it's not something that'll draw that much distrust. No doubt it's possible to misuse it, but that pretty much goes for anything.

"I will now demonstrate actually creating shadows. Watch my Shadow Presence carefully."

As an Immortal, I can clearly observe as his energy moves inside him. Still, the students with Shadow Presence also seem to be grasping it. In a sense, it's similar to learning the Immortal Arts.

"He's certainly handsome..."

Lady Douve, you really have no other observation after seeing the shadows?

"Blois, don't you agree?"

"Yes, I would agree that he is indeed a handsome man... Sansui, please note that I'm only talking about his features, not about my taste in men as a woman."

I don't mind it, so you don't have to worry so much. Besides, Lady Douve's only looking for your agreement.

"...So, who do you think will win if the two of you fought?"

Evidently Lady Douve's curiosity has been piqued a bit, and so she turns to ask Blois. In response, Blois answers quickly and without hesitation.

"If the goal is simply to win, I would win."

Behind those words is the assumption that she's flying in the air, of course. The strength of magic lies in its effective range, and she can maintain that range if she flies. The most extreme example of that, of course, is the carpet-bombing technique used by the ace of House Caputo. I can float using my Immortal Arts, but I can't attack at range, so I only meet half of the conditions.

"Oh, well, I'm glad to hear that of my sword. That pleases me."

Lady Douve *does* seem pleased, likely sensing the words 'I can't defeat him with a blade' behind Blois's statement. In fact, Blois could almost certainly defeat even the Regent with magic. If the Sword and Shield Companies are the highest standard of ability in this kingdom, then Blois certainly achieves that standard. Tahlan, whose skills are such that Blois admits she can't beat him without relying on flight, can thus be considered perhaps a bit below the Thunder Knight in ability.

"To stand as a leader even in this kingdom...as expected of my brother."

"Sure, he's certainly good looking, but Saiga's a better man."

"How nice...I wish I had a Rare Art like that, or anything other than the Hex Arts..."

Saiga's retinue seems to be having fun watching the lecture, but my interest is what Eckesachs thinks.

"To think a Shadow Summoner would be apprenticed to Suiboku's apprentice. An odd world we live in."

"...Eckesachs, you've seen Shadow Summoning before?"

Saiga asks after hearing Eckesachs's comment. I admit I have some interest in the answer, too.

"Yes, when Suiboku was my wielder and we were wandering the various kingdoms. We fought many powerful warriors with various techniques, not simply limited to Shadow Summoning. That was a fun time."

It's over fifteen hundred years ago, but it seems my Master has also traveled the world. Now that I think about it, as Tahlan noted, the Immortal Arts aren't from this part of the world to begin with. Master Suiboku must have settled in those woods after centuries of wandering.

"You should go and learn Shadow Summoning, as well."

"But..."

"Shadow Summoning is useful and you lose nothing by learning it. While Suiboku's apprentice defeated him easily, Suiboku himself struggled against that technique in the past."

I honestly can't imagine how my Master, especially armed with Eckesachs, would ever struggle. That must be the gap between my Master after his millennium of refinement in the woods, and my Master before he ever arrived there. Actually, thinking about it, how does an Immortal make use of Eckesachs? Did he fight using a Ki Blade?

"Unlike Suiboku and his apprentice, your lifespan is short. Make sure you value your time and learn what you can, when you can."

"...Yeah, I know."

The students begin creating their own shadows. For them, that is their first step toward their futures. As he watches them, a look in Tahlan's eyes reminds me of a similar look my Master once had, back in the day.

Outside the academy, a large number of students and professors are taking practice swings. As I watch them, Saiga, who is taking a break, speaks to me.

"It's all rather relaxed, considering there's a war on..."

"I'm told House Caputo's ace fights like a heavy bomber. In which case, I doubt we are needed."

Perhaps I'm not one to talk, but I've heard it was an extremely one-sided swath of destruction. Obviously a fight between infantry and a bomber isn't going to be fair. Those of us from Japan are well aware of that reality.

"But I guess the war is going to continue... I wish it wouldn't..."

"While it's fine for you to believe that, I would not go around saying that aloud. The decision of what to do concerning the war isn't a matter of idle wishes, after all."

It's not as though I wanted to fight the Royal Guard and such, either. Whatever world you're in, duty forces you to do things you don't want to do.

"Now, shall we begin practice swings?"

"Okay."

"The important thing with practice swings is to learn the proper form. As a result, your strikes become stronger and it reduces the fatigue incurred with each swing."

I am now providing sword instruction not just to Saiga and Tahlan, but to the other students and professors, as well. Part of me wonders why. However, both His Brotherhood and His Fatherhood were quite enthusiastic about me instructing a number of students.

"We will value those you consider to have met a certain standard."

"Try using that as bait to get them motivated. We'll leave the number you teach to you, but fundamentally, the more the better."

Talk about a one-sided argument. Still, Eckesachs asked that I teach Saiga swordsmanship, and my Master directed me to instruct Tahlan. With permission given by His Brotherhood and His Fathership, I have no reason to turn down the Regent's request.

"I suppose it goes without saying, but they don't seem that motivated..."

"Well, of course. Motivating them is part of the master's job."

As I grumble, Lady Douve points out the obvious. To borrow my Master's words, to them the fact that they are apprentices of 'the World's Greatest Swordsman' has become their definition of 'the greatest.' But to just leave it at that would be sad indeed. If they're going to learn from me, they may as well learn the joys of being a swordsman.

"Perhaps I should make them split a boulder..."

"Hold up! Isn't that problematic for the apprentice of Suiboku, the man who abandoned me, to require?" Eckesachs complains.

"No, no. I imagine they won't really get motivated without a clear goal."

I suppose it's not right when considered from the perspective of teaching my current Master's techniques. However, I think being able to say that, by becoming the Apostle's apprentice, they learned to split a boulder with a sword, is probably the sort of goal that's suitable for this sort of training. The angle of the blade, body mass movement, simple arm strength. Meeting certain standards in things like that provides results that are easy for everyone to see.

Being easy to see is important. I sincerely believe that. When learning at the time scales of ordinary people, visible goals are important. I mean, I was still far from fully trained even when I turned about a hundred.

"Well, it's certainly true that it's different from the ideals espoused by my Master, but perhaps it's best to save those teachings for those who show particular motivation."

"Wouldn't that be insulting Suiboku's name? That is not something I can let pass."

"Those sorts of fakes are going to start popping up from here on out, no matter what we do. We'll have men who spent a day practicing swings with me claim that they were instructed by the kingdom's greatest swordsman. No doubt we'll have men who've never seen my face start claiming they managed to score a point off of me, too."

"Grrr..."

"It's fine; most of those fakes will be eliminated in time. If they have no skill of their own, they won't benefit from their claims. Fortunately, House Sepaeda and the other three Great Houses are aware of me."

The more highly placed the individual, the better they know of my ability, and as such, they know all about the 'sword beyond reach' that my Master made his ideal and that I carry with me. The truth of the matter

would be revealed easily enough by having the claimant fight someone of the appropriate skill.

"That's limited to those who know you. There could very well be those who don't know you who still revere the imposters."

"If we started cracking down on those, there'd be no end to the problem. Even if those sorts don't use my name or my Master's name, they'd do evil using someone else's name."

"But that's what I mean by insulting Suiboku's name!"

I think this propensity to cause trouble is probably part of the reason why my Master abandoned her. I know what she's trying to say, and it's a very human motivation, but for an Immortal, it really doesn't matter at all. An Immortal doesn't value their name, their fame, or their social reputation. That's part of what it means to cut away the desires of the mortal world.

"We stop being Immortals the moment we care about other people's opinions."

"It displeases me!"

"Eckesachs, I understand what you're saying, but could you watch my practice swings?"

Saiga looks at his sword (Eckesachs) a bit sadly as she gets upset about the subject of her former wielder (her old man). He seems a little down that no one is watching him practice. People have their histories, but it's really not something to get too upset about.

"M-My apologies! I got too caught up in this!"

"Well well, perhaps you should have just stayed in those woods?"

Happine taunts Eckesachs.

Still, this young lady doesn't seem afraid of anything. I mean, Eckesachs has been around longer than me and perhaps longer than my Master, but she treats her a bit roughly.

"S-So, what do you think, Sansui? About my swings?"

Blois practices in front of me, and I give her my sincere praise.

"As fine as always."

"Oh, yes? I see... I suppose you're right..."

While she uses a rapier, which is a completely different kind of sword to my own, I've actually spent a fair amount of time watching her practice, and I've fiddled quite a bit with her form over the years. I mean, she's still a genius when it comes to swordcraft. She's at the highest level of magic and swordsmanship this kingdom has to offer.

"Papa! You're not getting it! Mama...Miss Blois...wants to spend time talking to you, Papa!"

"...You're right. But I have to save that for later."

I continue my instruction, pushing aside the thought that the mortal world is a bothersome place to deal with. Still, the main act is coming next.

Later, I'm in the woods near the House Sepaeda estate. With no one else around, I'm now teaching Tahlan and Saiga.

"What is this?"

"This is a training weapon called a cloth stick. It's a wooden sword wrapped in cloth."

The name, of course, is just something I came up with.

It's now the early evening. With Tahlan's Shadow Summoning instruction finished and my own training for my general students and professors concluded, I'm now preparing to teach the two on their own. Instead of a wooden sword or an actual blade, we're using thin sticks wrapped in cloth, a stand-in for the foam training swords used in sport fighting on Earth. It's a bit painful when it hits, but I don't think it'll be lethal or anything.

"It might lack a little in tension, but you two are both well aware of the scariness of actual swords, so the only way forward is to do some classroom training to master the basics. Besides, injuries create the hassle of needing to treat the wounds."

"Ah, I see... So, the basics first."

"Yes, that's how we'll begin. This is the first time teaching for me, as well, so let's take things slowly."

The way of the sword is difficult but fun. It's not simply about slashing and killing. Swords that can only cut and kill are boring, after all. It's hard to maintain motivation when you don't enjoy something. That's all there is to it.

"Oh, and Lord Saiga. First, we will have you focus on strengthening your Divination and your Mystic Arts."

"Yeah, I know. Especially with Divination, it's not about seeing more of the future, but how to avoid freezing based on what I see."

"I'm glad you understand."

Divination will be a powerful tool if properly mastered. It's not a flashy technique, but it's also hard for others to notice its use. Currently, it's also the only Rare Art he can use in public other than the Mystic Arts.

"With the combination of Eckesachs and your mystic walls and armor, you will be able to defeat most opponents. After all, the Mystic Arts are quite powerful on their own."

"I suppose that's true..."

"Further... Factoring in that you will be learning Shadow Summoning, you should begin contemplating forms."

"Forms?"

"I suppose they're easiest to describe as 'special moves.'"

At the mention of special moves, his expression changes to one of excitement, then abruptly sinks. No doubt he's remembering the time I threw him before he could unleash his special move.

"Special moves... But the special move I came up with was easily countered..."

"I believe you now understand that you came up with that move while operating under several misconceptions. No doubt watching the Regent

fight the other day provided you with some insight, as well. What's important is to know your opponent and to know yourself, to know what results to look for in every situation. That's the key."

Tahlan already seems aware of it, but that last battle also gave Tahlan a chance to shine. No doubt the Regent was also aware that winning too often produces serious problems, and if she had won all three matches, that could have led to unnecessary resentment. Which is why she showed her cards before Tahlan's match and let him respond.

"The important thing is to not lose sight of your goals. You have many people to protect, do you not?"

"Yeah, you're right..."

"Once mastered, your sword will become formless, but if you don't have the time to reach that level of mastery, then creating various forms for different situations is a valuable investment of that time. Fortunately, you have a partner with greater insight than I possess."

"Alright, we'll talk about it."

They're completely different, but I would like them to clash without injury to meet their goals.

"Well, Prince Tahlan, please face off against Lord Saiga while paying attention to changes in his thoughts during his attacks. Try to feel out what the things you have been doing naturally against lesser opponents actually consist of."

"Understood!"

"Your weapons are wrapped in cloth. Attack one another without any hesitation or restraint. However, remember the swings you practiced during the afternoon."

And thus begins their training. I do think we're a bit excessively laid-back, considering there is an all-out war being waged in House Caputo's lands. However, it's not as though we have anything else to do, and all of the people I have met from the noble houses and the Royal House were all very capable, so let's just leave the worrying to them. Now is a time to focus on refinement.

Part 12 — Thread and Thrum

“Oh my, to think we would have so many visitors,” the Regent states rather breezily, appearing quite carefree.

Currently, a large group of ruffians are arrayed in front of us. It appears this is due to the airing of the news that “House Sepaeda’s ultimate apostle of the sword” is teaching swordsmanship at this academy. As a result, the sorts who hope to gain renown by defeating me, this kingdom’s greatest swordsman, have gathered here.

“You do look a bit weak, after all.”

Who was it again who made that weak-seeming man wear clothes that accentuate that alleged fragility? My kimono and sandals are part of my public persona. I mean, they *are* comfortable.

“Lady Douve, there are Royal Guards among them, albeit only a handful.”

“...Oh really?”

“Yes, some famous faces here and there.”

It was something so unusual that it even put Lady Douve on the back foot. A number of men who are directing an enormous amount of hostility my way are lined up, intentionally dressed in dirty clothes. As indicated by the fact that they were spotted by Blois, who isn’t an Immortal, they clearly stand out with their unusual posture and bearing, given their attire. They’re probably not suited for infiltration work.

“Why are those Royal Guardsmen going so far as to conceal their identities just to pick a fight with your bodyguard?” Happine asks, evidently not particularly concerned.

Oh, that’s right, she doesn’t know about how I fought the Royal Guard. Thinking about it, if she had known, she probably wouldn’t have had Saiga fight me in the first place. Even if Saiga can use all the various Arts, she probably wouldn’t think he could take on the entire Royal Guard.

“Oh, I know! I heard Papa once beat up all of the king’s knights!” Lain explains rather proudly to Happine.

It’s not something I like thinking about, but evidently it’s a source of pride for my daughter.

“...Seriously?”

“Yup! But it’s a secret!”

Lain, if it’s a secret, don’t say it so everyone can hear you.

I can feel the hostility from the Royal Guardsmen intensifying. I had considered it at the time, but now in hindsight it’s even more obvious that I went overboard. I have to wonder if there had really been anything to gain by picking such an obnoxious fight. In particular, His Brotherhood was definitely too aggressive, given he’d just inherited the title.

“No wonder why everyone says he’s the kingdom’s greatest swordsman...” Zuger says in surprise.

That's true, after that incident my reputation as the kingdom's greatest swordsman had spread widely and is now a well-established fact. I'm sure I would have been happy before becoming an Immortal, and I'm actually kind of pleased even now, but there's no point to any of it if it just ends up incurring a lot of ill will in the process. I mean, I know that fame comes with resentment, but still.

"Hah! Such is to be expected of my master, to have this many warriors assemble simply by putting his name out there. Still, this gathering is a mix of thread and thrum. If you will allow me, I, Tahlan, your apprentice, will choose the cream of the crop."

It's probably lacking in respect on my part to have Tahlan fight them, given that they're here to face me, even though he's undoubtedly correct that some are "thread," or worthy opponents, and others are "thrum," or unworthy refuse. I draw my wooden sword from my hip and step out in front. Seeing me do so, Lady Douve smiles. The truth is, it's more of a problem for Tahlan to get hurt here than it is for me.

"So, I suppose it is safe to assume that, as you are here at the academy, you are here for instruction, yes?" I, a visibly scrawny kid, step out and say, in rather grandiose fashion.

That earns a bunch of angry looks from the crowd.

"Damned brat, is this really the Apostle? The kingdom's greatest swordsman, really?"

"Oh, don't be so uptight, Mister Apostle... You got hired by House Sepaeda by showing your ability, yeah?"

"If we beat you, it won't just be House Sepaeda! Every other noble house will be beating down the door to hire us!"

I suppose they're being respectful by not even putting up a pretense for being there for anything else. It doesn't seem that all of them are driven by the exact same thought, but I suppose I'll respect their honesty in my own way.

"Very well. If there are those among you who wish to defeat me, then come at me once. No doubt my Mistress, Lady Douve Sepaeda, will treat the victors well."

"Yes, of course. Go on and challenge him together. If you defeat my bodyguard, no matter who is still standing, indeed, even if they're lying collapsed on the ground, I will reward you lavishly," Lady Douve says, rather generously.

Simultaneously, she is simply showing House Sepaeda's principle of rewarding competition. No doubt His Brotherhood and His Fathership would say the same thing, were they here.

"Of course, that is only if you manage to defeat the man before you."

Hearing the taunt and the guarantee, the ruffians split up into two groups. Basically, those who want to win in a hurry elect to surround me and plan to attack at once, while those who want to fight me more scientifically step back, trying to gauge my technique.

There are quite a few spectators. Since we're right in front of the academy, there are clusters of people peering out of the windows, while individual mages fly overhead.

"Very well. You may come at me when ready."

The thread and thrum have actually been divided a bit by this self-sorting. Most of the thread are trying to watch me, while the thrum have their swords angled toward me. Almost all of them are wearing leather armor, and while it's inexpensive and thin, it's also light and easy to move in. Although, honestly, it doesn't look like they have the skill to make use of that dexterity.

"—!"

The simplest and most effective way of attacking without warning is checking the location of the sun while surrounding me, making sure I can't catch sight of their shadow, and attacking from my blindspot. A courageous and foolish member of the thrum swings his sword in my direction. It's a good tactical decision, but his execution is sloppy.

"You haven't concealed your hostile intent."

"Guh?!"

I step back and thrust my sword behind me, point-first, without changing direction. I hit him square in the solar plexus, so he won't be able to breathe properly for a bit.

"Feel free to attack all at once."

I step away from the staggering fighter behind me so that I can inform the others around me of their options. Not that I don't understand just how hard it actually is to attack simultaneously, of course.

"Raaaaahhhh!"

"Hyaaaaah!"

"Grrraaaah!"

The men standing in front of me let out wild cries as they attack. Ordinarily, both carnivores and herbivores let out loud noises when they want the target to flee. There's no need to make noise if they're hidden behind the opponent and in their blindspot. Beasts don't make noise when they don't want their prey to flee. The men before me want me to run, to turn my back toward them. That's not a mistake, and it's not easy. Letting out a loud cry in battle is, in itself, pretty difficult.

The backswing is too early, and they're relying too much on momentum.

Once you begin an attack, it's hard to change its trajectory. Further, it's hard to see if the opponent has moved while you're moving, because your line of sight is restricted by your own sword and arms.

I take a big step forward and move out of the line of the attack. Then, I land a slash against one of the attackers to my right as we pass each other. Of course, I'm just using a wooden sword, so it doesn't result in an actual wound, just pain.

"Wha—?!"

"Hey, out of the way!"

The men attacking me were lined up abreast, so by standing at their flank, each one was blocked by the man next to them. It's not like they have the means to attack through the obstructing body, so they can't attack me without moving. As such, there's only one man who can attack me at present.

Before that moment ends, I land a blow on the head of the man in front of me before he can restore his form, staggering him. Slashing at someone with a blade means stepping forward, and that means you have to shift your center of mass forward. Even if you recover from that position, it's hard to change your direction.

"Y-You little...!"

"Your motivation is gone, I see. You can step away and regroup, or you can give up."

The last one standing seems pretty intimidated. His motivation is gone, his intensity has fled — basically, he's got no courage left. The two others that attacked with him had gone down easily. Seeing that, he's afraid of me.

"There's nothing to be gained by fighting purely out of stubbornness."

"S-Shut up!"

He slashes at me, still lacking in courage, and clearly worried about his safety. His hips aren't moving into the attack, and he's striking with his focus on the length of his sword and his arms — that is, he's well aware of his reach. As a result, he's attacking with weak knees and doesn't step forward nearly enough. A simple step back and his swing goes through empty air.

"Gah!"

"I tried to warn you."

Of course, I only say that after I land a proper blow on him.

I've split his scalp open and he's bleeding profusely. Head wounds bleed a lot, after all. If this was a battlefield, he might attack me again, but as he's already demoralized, he's not going to be able to muster up that effort.

"If you back down, they'll give you medical treatment. Move along."

"D-Dammit...!"

As I'm shorter than Blois, I'm also obviously shorter than the other men present. No doubt it's demoralizing to be beaten down by me when all I'm using is a wooden sword.

His expression twisted by humiliation and fear, he crawls away from the fight. Still, he's in better shape than the two on the ground.

"Well, then. Next."

Seeing my wooden sword splattered with blood, the combatants around me shudder. Those who were thinking they might be able to get lucky and defeat this kingdom's greatest swordsman... Having seen how that swordsman fights, they've lost their nerve entirely.



"So this is...the Young Apostle...bodyguard of House Sepaeda's Brat Princess..."

The stone faces surrounding me lose their will to fight as they face me. Doubt, confusion, reason, and emotion are all warring within them. And then...

"Scatter, you nithlings."

The thread that had been waiting behind them shove them aside.

"W-What the hell?! You think we're going to back down against this brat?!"

"Surely it's clear, even to your mean intellect. Numbers are meaningless against this man. At the very least, no matter how many dozens of your sort gather to fight, they won't even manage to scratch him."

Those with a certain level of skill thus give the others a way out. The thrum might not want to run away from someone as young as I look, but they can justify their flight if they're warned away by other combatants who are clearly stronger than they are. After the first steps back, the others follow suit, and that is how the uninjured thrum leave the fight.

"Fufufufufu!"

Lady Douve, forgetting that Tahlan is next to her, is laughing happily, and the other spectators from the academy are starting to taunt the ruffians by whistling and jeering. Pretty sure this is what people mean when they say that there's an ass in a lion's skin. Of course, with my skin, that ass might not seem all that ferocious.

"The nithlings have scattered... Sir, I would like to request your instruction."

"Very well. Each of you come and face me, one by one."

I would have preferred to show how I fight against groups, honestly, because it'd be good for Saiga to see that. I suppose I shouldn't have drawn blood against the first group of four. Of course, if the fight had continued in that fashion, even if I hadn't killed any of them myself, it was possible that some of them would have died anyway, as the injured fell on each other. I'd like to avoid having people die in front of my daughter.

"Alright..."

There are about ten men left. Of course, among them are those individuals from before, the ones that look like Royal Guardsmen. They appear to have been looking for an opportunity to attack me as I was fighting the thrum, but evidently the rabble collapsed more quickly than expected, and so they've decided to fight me one on one instead. If they tried to attack me from behind under the circumstances, no doubt someone would intervene to stop them.

"May I use magic?"

"If you believe you have the time to use it, then go ahead."

"Very well. Then I will refrain for now."

The opponent in front of me isn't going to use magic, so I can avoid using my Flash Step. The Flash Step is effective, but beating someone using Flash Step just makes the technique look impressive. I'd prefer to avoid using any of my Immortal Arts, if at all possible.

Keeping my two apprentices in mind, I drop into a middle stance.

"...!"

The man in front of me, like Blois, wields a rapier, a sword focused on piercing attacks. As the tip wavers in front of me, he lunges forward with a thrust toward my torso. The tip hits my chest. Well, touches it, at least. The rapier-wielder himself seems the most surprised by the result.

"Wha...?!"

"Well done."

To explain what happened, let's say you swing a baseball bat and make contact with a baseball. Obviously, the ball will go flying. However, that's only because the bat is making contact when it's at the height of its velocity and has the greatest kinetic energy. If you were to miss with the bat and then have the ball hit the bat by some mistake after it had already come to a stop, then the ball isn't going to go flying. It'll just roll on the ground a little.

The rapier in question is fully extended and has already stopped. The tip of the blade is touching me, but as it's stopped and has no force behind it, it obviously hasn't done any damage.

"...Why did you not counterattack?"

"It was an impressive lunge, so I wished to show my apprentices."

I don't know about his magical skill, but his ability with the rapier is on par with Blois's. I wanted to make sure those two had the chance to see that skilled lunge. If I had counterattacked, then they wouldn't have been able to see anything.

"...I missed your intent. That lunge was my greatest weapon. I'm afraid I have nothing else to offer, now that you have defeated it."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

It was a thrust that looked as though it would almost always make its way through the ribs and pierce the heart.

My response seems to have hurt him. I suppose it was arrogant of me. However, if I had taken the initiative, he wouldn't have been able to lunge at all, and if I had counterattacked, he would have just been knocked down. Demonstration lessons are tricky.

"Very well. Next, please."

"A'ight!"

Next up is a relatively short man; well, he's a bit taller than me, anyway. He holds his slim sword high above his head and slowly closes the distance. His expression is tense, but he's smiling.

"Mm."

"If I may ask, Master Apostle?"

"Yes?"

"Are you..."

Before he finishes his comment, he releases his sword and drops it behind him. Simultaneously, he throws a dagger he had been hiding in his right hand at me. The throwing technique is impressive. The dagger, thrown without so much as a quick step in, is aimed perfectly at my face.

"I don't believe a move like this..."

I use the tip of my sword to deflect the dagger and, moving just my wrists, I hit him lightly on the head as he lowers his stance and comes at me from below. It was a light blow, but it was still from a wooden sword.

"Is suited for this particular situation."

"—Wha?!"

Feinting by making it appear as though he's going to slash downward from his high stance, then attacking by throwing a hidden dagger... Going in for a low lunging attack with the dagger in his other hand, before checking if the first throw even made contact... I knew that was the sort of move that was coming, but I wish he hadn't used it here.

"...You anticipated my attack immediately?"

"Throwing a dagger and taking the opponent by surprise... If it's an unskilled opponent, you can follow up quickly and finish them after they've been hit in the face. If they're skilled, they'll either block or dodge the thrown dagger, so you lower your stance and lunge at them from below. With the thrown dagger included, it's certainly an impressive attack, but it's not suitable for this setting."

"How... I thought I had you for sure!"

Human eyes tend to follow things that are in motion. Moreover, they aren't generally able to follow one thing that's close and another at a distance at the same time, because the eyes can't focus on two separate places at the same time. This means that, once a dagger is thrown at you, you can't help but have your attention captured by it. If you take advantage of that throw and use that moment to lower your stance and come in with a lunge, then the opponent is going to lose sight of you. Such a maneuver is certainly hard to avoid.

"It's because you were smiling. I could see you wanted to show something off. It was in your expression."

"That gave it away?!"

"Also, while you were measuring the distance, it wasn't the right distance for an attack with your sword, and thus I could anticipate a projectile. Further, even if you were to try a sneak attack with a thrown weapon, having seen how I fight, I doubt you would have believed you could possibly defeat me just with that."

He was full of confidence. His face had given away his belief that he could beat me with that move. That expression tipped me off that he had something planned, and it showed that he had something to hide.

"To repeat myself, that is not a move you should use with this many people watching. The conflict within you, as you knew you were going to do a sneak attack, but also hoped to receive praise from those around

you...seeing that was enough to know what you were planning. However, because that was the case, you should not have used that particular maneuver. There is a time and a place for certain tactics, and when you use them, you must remain completely calm, as though you were practicing."

It's a hard move to respond to if it's the first time you've seen it, but it doesn't seem like it'd be very effective against someone wearing armor, and I think it'd be a difficult move to use even if they weren't. However, no doubt it's something he spent a lot of time thinking about, then practicing, and then testing. I didn't mean to mock the move, considering the effort he put in. But still, he needs the critique.

"Also, I believe that's a move that truly shows its value in opponents who are larger than you. It's not a move best suited for use against me, given that I am smaller than you."

"You win, sir..."

I wonder what my expression looks like right now. When you're observing someone, that person is likely to be watching you as well. It's natural for your emotions to show in your expression, rather than to maintain a completely stoic expression. So, I wonder, what sort of expression did I have when I saw him smiling?

"Next, please."

I see that next up is one of the vengeful Royal Guardsmen. I don't think I did anything particularly underhanded in that match, honestly, but given the results, I suppose it's still hard to accept the outcome.

"Please, go ahead."

"Very well."

I feel a bit of pressure from his hidden intensity, but I respond anyway.

"I have a request before I show you my move."

"...Yes?"

"I would like to have a mystic wall created around us, to protect the people behind you."

The people he's probably referring to are Lady Douve and Happine. In other words, he's stating he's about to use a wide-area attack, and he likely intends to use a spell that would hit him as well. The leather helm that he's wearing appears to be wet. In fact, his clothes are also pretty wet, and the skin I can see has burn scars.

I glance at Saiga and have him create a wall of light, amplified by Eckesachs. He makes certain to take it all the way up to the ceiling. It's a pretty big wall of light, a bit bigger than would be needed for a sword fight.

At the same time, Saiga looks extremely uneasy. Well, that's understandable, as the man facing me is overflowing with hostility.

"How much...do you intend to insult us?"

He likely couldn't have used his technique safely without the wall, but it's hard to accept when your hated enemy accepts that proposal so easily.

"I don't know what you refer to, but it's perhaps best not to say aloud."

With the requested wall of light in place, the guy — who's definitely not a Royal Guardsman — and I stand inside it.

"I'm trying to be considerate, so I would prefer if you wouldn't say something to ruin the mood."

"Very well. I believe you are aware of what sort of move I am considering. If that's the case, then why are you allowing it?"

"There's no...particularly deep reason. I simply wish to see your sword."

I don't need to see it, really. I mean, it's clearly a self-destructive move. It's probably the sort of move where he uses fire magic to take me down with him.

"And...I now have apprentices to teach. For both their sake and yours, I would rather not take you down before you can use your technique."

Regardless of what he plans to do, if I take the initiative, I'm confident that I can take him down first. All I have to do is lift him and throw him like I did with Saiga. If I drop him on his head, he'll be knocked out. But, there's not much meaning to that, since I've already demonstrated a similar maneuver...

"...Apprentices. I see. I also had a Master. A Master I highly admired. Indeed, I still admire him."

"I see. I hope to be such a master, some day."

"For the honor of my company — no, the honor of my Master — I am about to challenge you, this kingdom's greatest swordsman, without regard for appearances. In spite of that, you intend to maintain your reserve?"

I know what he wants to say, but what am I supposed to do, then? It seems he himself sees a problem with his move, but he seems to think I'm underestimating him by not pointing that out. No doubt he'd hate me no matter what, and it's rather depressing.

"I've spent all of my effort to develop a move to defeat you! It takes time to activate, and it's a move that destroys me in the process!"

"I see. Well, that sounds like a lot of effort. I'm good at taking the initiative, but I'll wait until you finish your move!"

That's the current situation. I suppose it's all a bit of a farce. Still, I defeated a gentleman who used impressive lightning magic with my speed. As such, it's unreasonable to try to win in that particular field. Still, to go so far in the opposite direction is also pretty excessive.

"It's not as though you're attacking me while I'm sleeping, nor are you teaming up with anyone in this dueling space. I don't believe saying 'without regard to appearances' is appropriate. Just as you are seeking victory in this battle, I wish to defeat your ultimate technique."

I don't intend to stop him, but there is someone in my awareness who's thinking about it. The Regent seems to be considering whether or not to stop the use of dangerous magic, which she thinks the students shouldn't see, as she watches the match. At the same time, she doesn't put words to her thoughts. She seems to respect his dedication, as one servant of the crown to another.

“...Torch Shower!”

As he casts his spell, an orb of fire appears several feet above his head and bursts. It's a spell that scatters 'embers' across the entire field. Of course, they're embers that are hot enough to burn through your skin.

In this world there's no such thing as flame armor or a flame shield, as there's basically no point to either. However, this spell is about as close as you can get to that. Since I, as a swordsman, don't have any ranged attack capability, keeping me at a distance is the best solution. That means that, if you fill the entire space around you with embers, I can't get close.

In fact, given that we're in this sealed-off space, the spell will hit me. It's an attack that fills a space without regard to direction, focused entirely on doing damage to me without any regard for killing or defeating me. He wants to injure me, even if he has to cover himself in embers to do it. That's the level of dedication put into this spell. He probably felt quite a bit of shame in coming up with it.

“The idea isn't wrong. No doubt there are victories you must win at a cost to yourself.”

Yes, it's not wrong, exactly. I don't know if the man in front of me is a member of the Sword or Shield Company, but regardless, he's in a position where he needs to protect the king and the king's authority, even at the cost of his life. If he can do damage to me at the cost of burning himself, that's not necessarily the wrong choice. It's a knight's technique, not a duelist's.

“However... This is a bit...”

But there's a difference between preparing for injury and preparing for death. In the latter case, I would have stopped it, and no doubt considered the possibility that he would die first as I focused on avoiding damage. Taking me down with him is one thing, but no doubt he didn't want to suffer a meaningless death.

“Well, it's kind of awful...”

It was a spell that, in practicing it, only resulted in him burning himself. It's a fire-starting ember, and considering that the area around himself is the hottest, he also still has to keep the embers at a temperature that he can withstand, rather than one that would be instantly lethal. After all, it's a spell that continually spreads fire in all directions, and not something that triggers once, then stops.

“To continually fill the area around you to stop me from using Flash Step... That isn't a mistake, really. As a result, you've hurt yourself, and as such you have to endure it through sheer force of will and with special equipment. But that's where it stops. Your line of sight is blocked by the embers, and as a result, you can't respond to my next attack.”

It's as though there's red snow falling, like the burning ash drifting down from an erupting volcano. It's not enough to completely block my line of sight, but it does reduce visibility. No doubt it's even worse for him.

“This move...is too easy to read.”

“Still...I doubt you'll be able to withstand it!”

“And if I say that’s not so?”

The embers fill the space. However, as it’s a spell that spreads out from the caster, it’s not as though the entire space is filled all at once.

Essentially, it spreads outward like a smoke cloud. Since it’s not a single burst attack on everything around him, and thus needs to be sustained, the spell itself isn’t particularly burdensome, nor is it fast. That’s the only way this move works.

In fact, it’s impossible to do otherwise. Regardless of how small the space might be, filling the entire space with lethal fire instead of just the floor is beyond his ability. He should be at his limit just trying to inflict burns.

I release Ki Waves from my entire body in a slow, pulsing rhythm, as though I’m breathing. It obviously doesn’t do much, but it’s enough to create a disruption in the air, pushing away the embers.

“Oof... It’s hot...”

I mean, it’s not doing enough to just push back the embers. Considering that it’s a space filled with fiery particles, it’s hot and stuffy. I’m just barely keeping myself from burning.

“Grr...!”

“You came up with a spell that could attack across an entire area because you can’t read where my attack might come from. However... Your line of sight is restricted by the embers. I’m sure it’s hard to keep your eyes open.”

“But inside these embers, no doubt you won’t be able to move, either.”

“Indeed, that’s true.”

With a directed attack, even with heat and lightning, I can avoid it. That’s why he chose to do a wide-area attack, instead.

That’s the right call, but...

“But...”

“But what?!”

He tenses, knowing that I can read openings.

I can’t use my Flash Step within this storm of embers, and since my opponent doesn’t intend to attack me, I can’t take the initiative, nor can I counterattack. I mean, I suppose I can just smack him with my Ki Blade until he goes down, but that seems a bit excessive against someone who’s focusing entirely on defense.

“You’ve focused too much on your own willpower.”

I slowly raise my wooden blade with my right hand, and then bring it down. It’s a slow attack, but even as he sees it, he holds back. He’s not trying a desperate counterattack, or even trying to block it. He intends to endure it with sheer strength of will.

“The human body can’t take that much punishment.”

I press the tip of my wooden blade against my opponent’s face. His entire body tenses in preparation for an attack, but all I do is lightly brush my wooden sword against him.

In that brief moment where he's confused at the lightness of the touch, I release the hilt of my sword with my left hand and bring the hilt down with a strong Ki Wave. I hit a pressure point, a dangerous spot that you shouldn't teach to children, with absolute precision.

"Mister Saiga, release your wall! Quickly, douse the flames with water magic! Healers, hurry!"

The Regent issues a series of appropriate instructions, once she's confirmed that that my attack hit and that the Royal Guard-ish person is unconscious. She had probably mentally prepared for this once she saw what he had planned. A deluge of water rains down on us, cooling me and the guy who's definitely a Royal Guardsman.

"Thank you..."

"I would have preferred if you had defeated him more quickly..." the Regent mutters at me, after I'm thoroughly soaked.

That's understandable. As an educator it's not fun for her to watch a failed attempt unfold like that.

"But he... Well, that is to say, the one who invited him was..."

"I mean, I felt a bit bad about that, but..."

That removes any doubt on my end. The Regent must have invited him. I suppose both she and the Royal Guard serve the crown, after all. But no doubt she didn't think he'd do something this stupid.

"...Are you unhurt?"

"Yes, thanks to the water, I'm not hurt at all..."

Blois looks a bit panicked as the Regent looks me over. Although she can't leave Lady Douve's side, she seems really worried.

Lain seems to be relaxed, clearly thinking, 'Papa will be fine.' As a parent, I wish she'd show a *little* more concern.

"Yes, but still... The plan was lacking in decisiveness."

A mystic heals the Royal Guardsman-ish person. Near him are people who seem to be his comrades, each visibly fighting back their disappointment. They're also covered in burns, so either they were practicing the same spell, or they had helped him in his preparations.

In the end, I have to say it was a wasted effort.

"Even if he had positioned allies outside the embers, all I would have had to do is defeat those allies first. Given that no possible path led to victory, he was certainly mistaken in trying it."

"...Lightning Slasher!"

His comrades glare at me upon hearing my explanation.

Um, please at least try a little to hide your identities. I've been told that only those serving the crown call me that.

"There's one thing that I can be certain about... Among the foes I've faced, the strongest was a truly impressive man. I would have preferred not to fight him."

"My, that is, our Master...retired after a match with...a certain individual."

I suppose they're trying to be vague, but it's clear who they're talking about.

"He said, 'It was as though the God of War himself had patted me on the head.'"

God of War... I mean, I don't exactly have a high opinion of God. Besides, I'm nowhere close to my Master in skill, and I cannot very well consider myself a God of War. Though, no doubt they'd be extremely angry if I said that.

"He said that it felt as though he had been treated like a child, that it was a rejection of his entire life's work. That his commitment to being the greatest sword and shield...it all felt like the boasts of a mere child."

"...I see."

"We still hold our Master in the highest regard."

With that, they pick up my opponent after he receives his treatment and carry him off. Seeing them depart, I'm filled with regret. I can't deny it. For an old man nearing retirement to be overwhelmed by a swordsman who looked like a child wielding a wooden sword... There's no way such a person could handle an experience like that the way Tahlan did. Not only did I defeat him, but I dirtied the late autumn period of his life.

"This too, is an obligation imposed by the mortal world, I suppose..."

I can't wallow for long. I'll resume my instruction when they return.

Assembled here are those who have received treatment, people from the academy who have previously received instruction from me, and the parties from both House Batterabbe and House Sepaada. I need to summarize the match and then provide instruction for Saiga and Tahlan.

"So, this time I was able to have the cooperation of many people, but... What did you think, Prince Tahlan, Lord Saiga?"

The reason I took time to break down the fights after each match was for the education of these two. The whole exercise would have been meaningless if they hadn't learned anything. Well, I mean, I suppose there'd still be meaning in it for those who faced me.

"You are impressive, my Master. To face your opponents on their terms...in that, I could see the meaning of greatness."

"Eh, that was more than cheating, that was full-on TAS."

Putting Tahlan's statement entirely aside, Saiga's is a bit disrespectful. TAS, seriously? At least call it an RTA. That aside, I know what he's trying to say, and I suppose that's actually how I fought.

"Now, you two will face the people I fought using cloth sticks. There are many people here, so this is a good place to gain experience."

"Indeed... There were certainly many of them with exciting skills."

"Got it... And we're all going to use the cloth sticks, right?"

"Yes. Incurring more injuries here would be no fun for anyone, after all."

This goes for anything in life, but repetition is key when training for combat. The ability to consider a situation 'normal' is the key to reducing

fear and hesitation. Tension and nerves are rough edges to smooth away when wielding a blade.

“U-Um, Professor Sansui!”

“You don’t need to call me professor. I’m just an instructor.”

“What must we do to move like you, Instructor Sansui?”

Hearing the academy student’s question, both the thread and thrum pay close attention. I suppose that’s understandable. I look like I’m under twenty, so no doubt they think there’s some method to become strong in a short time by starting as a child. Of course, both House Batterabbe nor House Sepaeda know that isn’t the case.

“Allow me to preface this by saying it’s not impossible, though it is largely a question of how much.”

It’s not like I’m doing anything that’s impossible for a human being to do, so it’s possible to some extent. The problem is what we’re talking about with ‘how much.’

“Would one of you mind coming forward and swinging at me from a high stance? You can use a normal sword, if you wish.”

Hearing that, the burned Royal Guardsman is the first on his feet. Without hiding his hostility, he squares up against me with his sword in a high stance.

“Now, as you can see, I’m unarmed. I will now avoid his slash and hit his head with a chop.”

All I’m doing is explaining what I’m about to do, but the expression of the Guardsman in front of me is hard to describe. The same goes for his comrades. Lady Douve looks entertained, but it’s long past time for her to realize that this isn’t a laughing matter.

“Please come at me with the intent to kill me.”

“You need not tell me that!”

As a Royal Guardsman, he’s got an impressive physique. A man large enough to make me look up at him, he quivers with rage as he brings his sword down at me with all his might. It’s very intimidating.

I say it’s intimidating, but still I dodge it and hit him with a chop. He’s a good deal taller than I am, but I can reach his forehead if I fully extend my arm.

“—!”

“If you practice this repeatedly, you should be able to do the same.”

“Truly?!”

“The problem is that being able to do this is meaningless.”

With that I have the Guardsman return to the others. His body’s still quivering with rage, but I’d like him to accept this result for the moment.

Next, I have the student from the academy in front of me. He’s a little taller than I am, and his face is full of anticipation.

“Now, I will swing downward. I’ll do it slowly, so avoid it and hit me with your hand.”

“Yes, sir!”

I intentionally exaggerate my motions and swing my arm down. Obviously, it's going to be slow, so even the student in front of me can avoid it even with his inefficient movements. And then, he lands a pretty hard blow on my face.

"So, if we keep making this faster...!"

"Well, it's certainly possible, in theory. However..."

I demonstrate a second time. This time, I mix in a mild feint. His body twitches, and in the end he isn't able to respond to the actual blow and takes the hit. All I was doing was waiting to see his concentration flag.

"That's not fair..."

"I'm afraid a dead man won't be able to say that. At any rate, it's not as though we're doing choreographed fighting or kata lessons, nor is your opponent matching their motions to yours. But in spite of this being a simple overhand attack, you can easily throw off their timing. More importantly, as you wait for your opportunity, there's a chance you'll get stabbed in the back."

Again, it's a question of 'how much.' There's a difference between being able to do something, being able to use that thing, and then being able to use that thing in combat.

"It's not something that's limited to this one example. First, you practice and learn the ability to do it once. Then, eventually you'll be able to do it when you're in good shape, then you'll be able to do it whenever you wish and, finally, you'll be able to do it without even thinking. And at that stage... You're finally at the point where you can do a demonstration in a dojo. However, this technique is far too low a level to make use of in actual combat."

No doubt it's irritating to hear a child like me say this, but with an actual demonstration in front of them, they listen without complaint.

"If I were holding a steel sword rather than a wooden sword, would you have been able to avoid my attack like that?"

"P-Probably not..."

"Indeed. Even if the length and weight are the same, the fear of a weapon like a steel sword would make you unable to take your usual actions. Meaning, in order to be able to do the same against someone with a steel sword, you need experience. And this, too, follows the same steps as before. That is, you can do it once, then you can do it several times, then you can do it when you focus, then you can do it normally, then you can do it without thinking. At that point, you'll finally be able to make use of it in one-on-one fighting. However, dodging an overhead attack from a high stance is relatively simple. It's meaningless unless you can do it with an opponent in any stance."

Those other than the members of House Batterabbe and House Sepaeda listen with a disgruntled expression. Certainly, I suppose it's not convincing coming from me.

“To be able to do this in actual combat...that is, in war... Not only must you expand your horizons, but also take multiple steps to get there. Otherwise, it’s quicker and more certain to fight normally.”

“And you are able to do this, Instructor Sansui?”

“That is as I showed you earlier. Even if I were to face everyone present, I would be able to defeat you all with this wooden sword.”

The glares from the Guardsmen hurt. The stare from the Regent is a bit scary. Please, Lady Douve, don’t laugh.

“But even I’m not satisfied with my own ability. At the very least, I’m still far from the skill of my Master, Suiboku. Still, by mastering the opportunities available to you, and by being able to claim the initiative, whether before or after your opponent’s attack, you will be able to triumph over your opponent, no matter who they are, or how numerous they might be. At the very least, I believe I have achieved that much.”

It’s something that anyone can do after five hundred years of training. The problem before me is whether or not I can instruct Tahlan, at the very least, to do this properly.

“How far you intend to train yourself is up to you.”

This preface is getting a bit long. I’ve shown them a goal, and the meaning behind it. Now all that is left to do is the repetition.

“I apologize for keeping you waiting, Prince Tahlan, Lord Saiga. Take up your training weapons and relax as you face your opponents. The important thing is to truly enjoy yourselves.”

Part 13 — Lovers

The really important thing in combat is to maintain your composure. However, maintaining composure also means desiring the status quo and fearing change, as well as exposing you to the danger of losing your ability to respond honestly to things. At the very least, my Master showed me an unchanging back to follow. As someone who follows in his footsteps, teaching the blade to other people...thinking about my imperfections is to be expected.

Still, instruction means not to look at what your own flaws are, but rather to look at what is missing in your pupil. No doubt there is some satisfaction in pointing out what they're missing, or in feeling exasperation at their immaturity or their failings. However, if you allow that to cloud your sight and let it lead you into arrogance, then you're only exposing your own shortcomings.

According to my Master, my current skill is about on par with where my Master was five hundred years ago — that is, my Master after a thousand years of training. However, according to Eckesachs, my Master spent time traveling the mortal world prior to shutting himself in those woods. As such, my Master has already experienced living in the mortal world, and I'm still lacking in that experience.

I suppose one way to put it is to say that failures are part of learning. What I need to do is accept that I have imperfections, understand that I am arrogant toward others, and through all of that, attempt to maintain my humility and honesty.

I lay sleeping in my bed in the House Sepaeda estate after having pondered such things. The sun is already down, so it's time to sleep. I don't know about other Immortals, but at the very least, both my Master and I are the sort to sleep at night. I've been able to get rid of my other desires, but my desire for sleep remains fully intact. Having spent so much time with my Master, I don't eat or drink, nor do I have anything in the way of lust, but I do get extremely sleepy at night.

As I'm dozing, someone stops outside my door. It's a familiar presence — that is, it's Blois. I have neither the ability to see through obstacles, nor the ability to read minds. At most, I'm able to read a person's emotions and their physical state. Despite all that, considering her nervousness, I strongly suspect she's wearing her A-game clothes.

"...If Lady Douve sees you like this, you won't hear the end of it."

"It's fine, as you might have noticed, she's with Prince Tahlan."

I open the door to reveal Blois in a negligee, a look of intense distress on her face. On one hand, she wants me to notice her, but on the other, she's clearly regretting her decision to come here.

"You...can read my emotions, right?"

"Even if I couldn't, I see it in your face. You're panicked, but you're also struggling to work up your courage."

I usher Blois into my room and sit on the bed. As the starlight filtering through the window illuminates the room, neither Blois nor I can look the other in the face.

"You see through everything... I'm very glad you're not my enemy."

"That goes for me, too. At the very least, I've had little to regret since joining House Sepaeda."

I mean, Immortals have no enemies. The moment you hold hatred in your heart for someone, then you've failed as an Immortal. In that sense, my Master was a failure as an Immortal when he was traveling the realms looking for opponents to fight, and my Master as he currently is has perhaps returned to his true path as an Immortal. In that sense, I suppose I'm a failure as an Immortal, too.

"...They say flowers have short lives. But that's particularly true when compared to you."

"The problem there is with me. You have your own pace to live by."

"With that logic, I'm perfectly ordinary at the moment. Is it so wrong that I want to be by your side?"

"I've never thought it was wrong."

In spite of her usual decisiveness, Blois is hesitating. It's hard to think of her as being here for any reason other than to 'seal the deal,' but she's taken the stance of responding to an entreaty, with no plan for stepping over the line herself. While hoping for something to happen on one hand, there's part of her that would also prefer that nothing happens. Love is a hard thing to deal with.



"You were the only one at my side, after all."

"That's true. You and I have been guarding Lady Douve all these years."

"It seems that spring is about to come for her, too."

"Yes, that's a good thing. Her confidence in her luck isn't misplaced. A man as suitable as him doesn't come around very often."

The things that keep us tied to Lady Douve are simple. She never goes back on her word, she's upfront about everything, she allows us to work without excessive demands, and pays us as promised and promptly. Those reasons are more than enough to make her an important person for Blois and I to protect.

"You're right... It seems that there aren't any obstacles in the way of me marrying you."

"Yep, that's true."

"No doubt you've gone through a period like this, though I'm sure it was a long time ago."

"Speaking of a long time ago... I never imagined that, when I first met you, you'd become such a woman. Though, really, I was taller than you when we met."

"That's right... We change so quickly."

Blois presses closer to me, as though seeking reassurance. I can't help but think back to how young she was five years ago, but she's really grown. I take her weight against me, wrapping my arm around her shoulder and pulling her close.

"You're capable of a little gallantry, I see... I'm afraid of changing. I feel like I'll be an old woman before long."

"I think that would be nice, in its own way."

"...And even then, you'll probably be the same as you are now."

I suppose that's one way to think about it. I can understand where she's coming from. But the reality is a little different. Immortals aren't, well, unkillable. We simply don't age. Blois will almost certainly be dead a century from now, but I can't say for certain that I won't be dead tomorrow. Today is the day that should always be the most important.

"You're probably right."

"And then, after I die, after Lain dies, will you return to those woods?"

"I hope so. If I can stay with you till the end of your days, no doubt that time would be filled with joy. It's not something that's as easy to do as it sounds, living out your whole lifespan."

It's possible to have your candle snuffed by mistake. At least, that's what it was like for me.

"When I see you, I find myself not wanting to change... If things continue, soon I'll be all wrinkly."

"That sounds rather nice, actually. No doubt you'd be an elegant old lady."

"It's just a blink of an eye for you, I suppose, given that you've been around five hundred years. I haven't been alive for even twenty years, so I can't even imagine..."

We turn to each other, and Blois wraps her arms around my waist, clinging to me. Since I'm smaller, it's as though she's clutching a stuffed animal.

"While there's a part of me that's not sure about going through with this... I also want to be connected with you while I'm still close to you in appearance. But you see those feelings in me, too, no doubt."

"Of course, but you know me well, too."

"That's true, I do know you well. So, for tonight...let me lean on you. I'm so anxious that I can't sleep."

"You really are an impressive man. You're alone with me, at night, and yet not even a leer."

"Not at all. You are truly attractive, my lady. As for myself, whether within my kingdom or without, I have had many lashes fluttered at me, but rarely have I had women confident enough to approach me."

A bewitchingly voluptuous woman, a coolly debonair man... Douve and Tahlan are indulging in an adult evening at the Sepaeda estate.

An appropriate amount of alcohol, a few hors d'oeuvres... With those set on a table, they sit companionably in a room dimly lit by candles.

"Still, we have a man and woman meeting secretly at night. I have no intention of letting you go."

"Ah, a conundrum. I'm afraid you have me cornered, my lady."

Douve is already well aware that the man in front of her is not here to indulge in his desires. He is, without doubt, here to talk of matters more serious than pleasure. He longs to speak his thoughts to her. Fortunately, she has more than enough confidence and capacity to indulge him in that.

"So what is it you wish to discuss?"

"It is about your two blades."

While Sansui's ridiculous strength draws most of everyone's attention, Blois is also a powerful opponent, one that even Tahlan would struggle against. Further, House Sepaeda's cavalry also boast many men of ability.

"According to my Master's daughter, there is a Royal Guard that serves the crown directly."

"Yes, there is. But surely there is an equivalent in your kingdom?"

"Most certainly, they exist. However, they are not stronger than the king or the great nobles."

The Sepaeda house cavalry are powerful, but the people who were directing their hostility at Sansui this afternoon were all powerful in their own right. Those who have power employ those stronger than themselves, often en masse. That was something that could never stand in Magyan.

"Such a thing is impossible at least under our kingdom's system."

"The most powerful man becomes king. A simple ideal, if rather a masculine one."

"Indeed, but that is why it is just and fair. Those simply born as children of a king don't have a crown handed to them by dint of their royal birth. However, that also means that the king cannot have anyone stronger than himself in the kingdom."

Tahlan is attempting to take the Mystic Arts back to his kingdom, in exchange for teaching Shadow Summoning. There is no hesitation for him in that. Healing powers will lead to greater prosperity for the people.

However, he has no intention of taking magic with him. If he were to do that, the kingdom would fall into chaos. Magic, with the potential to defeat Spirit Summoning, has the possibility of severely disrupting his kingdom's carefully constructed social order.

"Both your brother and your father, while skilled warriors in their own right, are not individuals who could be considered the most powerful in the world."

"True. Obviously they couldn't defeat Sansui, but they'd also likely lose to Blois."

"In addition, you have no fighting ability yourself. And yet, those two serve you."

From his perspective, this state of affairs is unthinkable.

"Who serves as the lord makes no difference. Those are the words spoken by my brother and my father."

"May I ask what they mean by this?"

Spirit Summoning is powerful. The user, who becomes a giant beast, can turn aside most blades. Certainly, they would never simply be defeated without extracting a heavy cost. However, several mages of the Regent's skill could likely take down the king, which would then undermine the current system, wherein the most powerful individual becomes king.

"I'm afraid I never understood that, either. However, no doubt that's true of the neighboring kingdom, as well. Perhaps you should test it and find out."

"I see, so you wish for me to participate in the fighting."

"Yes, join my brother and father and put up results. I would like you to show just how powerful you are, so that everyone will accept that you, a prince from a faraway, unknown kingdom, are worthy of marrying me."

"A fallen empire, a new empire...and a victorious kingdom. I see. It seems that there is much to learn."

This kingdom's ruler is clearly a powerful king. A weak king would bring confusion to the kingdom, after all. At least, that is Tahlan's belief. However, he's probably not as strong as Magyan's king. Yet, this 'country' is stronger than Magyan is.

"But still, I would like you to learn the taste of this kingdom's wine."

"My thanks... Though I fear I may misplace my hands."

"A man in my daughter's estate... KILL THEM ALL!"

After Lady Douve spent an evening with Tahlan, and after drawing a not *altogether* incorrect conclusion, His Fathership attacked the estate, and was put down by me, before I began my next lesson in front of the academy. With His Fathership present, I'm instructing many students and a large number of skilled warriors, who have all assembled from across the kingdom.

"You're too tense."

"I-Indeed?"

"The Lord Emeritus of House Sepaeda is in attendance. It's understandable that you would be a bit tense. However, that will also make it more difficult for you to stand out."

"M-My apologies."

"Try to consider what your current situation is, and then work to be able to move your body as you intend. If you're not mentally composed, it will be difficult to look at your own movements objectively."

To many of those present, the presence of the previous lord of House Sepaeda looms large. After all, he is a man who is as close to the top of this kingdom as it's possible to be. It's understandable that they'd be nervous.

"This is quite a large number of students."

"It is a bit embarrassing... I'm afraid word of my presence has gotten out, and as a result a great number of people have started showing up in front of the academy."

"Oh, odd, isn't it?"

The Regent smiles pleasantly to His Fathership. But I'm already well aware of all this. That the Regent has prepared the temporary seating and shelter outside the academy, along with things like alcoholic drinks and snacks...it's impressive, but perhaps to be expected of a Sage.

"But it's a happy coincidence indeed. When it comes to swordsmanship, well, that's always been outside of my area of expertise, so I could never be sure what the standard of instruction was at the academy. But, from now on, we can have the kingdom's greatest swordsman teach people here."

Now, as to whether said swordsman's instruction is what this academy wants... I understand the desire to have the highest level of instruction, I really do, but do the students really want to learn the sword that badly? I suppose this isn't something an instructor should say, but I don't think the students here are that motivated. At the very least, even in my case, in spite of being stuck deep in the woods with no way out and with no choice but to practice, it took me years to work up the motivation to work that hard.

"Um, your lordship. While this is a difficult point to bring up, with the exception of a handful of students, I believe it would perhaps be better for the rest to focus on endurance training, group practice, and building up their physical strength..."

"We already do such things in our realm. If we are to seek out talent from here, it would be to find talents on the level of Blois, and then to train them."

You're setting the bar way too high. She's at the absolute top of the scale as an individual.

"I know what you want to say. You have your own knowledge of House Sepaeda's training methods. However, if there are those who are seeking to make a name for themselves, then this is the right way to do it. If there's even one individual that you, the kingdom's greatest swordsman, thinks is a worthy talent, then that vindicates the entire effort. There is no need to coddle them. If they don't flower here, then that's all they were."

"I understand, my lord."

As I grasp what he wishes to say, I have nothing to say in response. I suppose, for people that aren't satisfied with becoming an ordinary retainer and want to strike it big, this is the right approach. They want to become stronger than what's normal, receive treatment beyond the ordinary, and live a lavish lifestyle. The same goes for His Fathership. There's no point in him gathering ordinary talents; he wants someone at least as powerful as Blois.

"Oh dear, is the Lord Emeritus going to form an honor guard of some sort? Such spirit for a retired man."

"Hardly a remark I expected from someone who is still going strong in spite of being older than I am. Further, House Disaea still has the generation before mine in charge. I can't very well settle into a life of quiet retirement."

The Regent, who serves the crown, starts poking around, not for the sake of her master, but simply to satisfy her curiosity. I'm pretty sure she's got the most freedom out of all of us. As a result, His Fathership is pretty wary of her, too.

"What is important is to tell the world that the greatest is here, with all his skill, and for as many as possible to know him and to fear him. Sansui is the greatest in the kingdom, but few actually believe in his power."

"Oh? Are you so sure?"

"To actually face him, to know just how far beyond their reach the kingdom's greatest swordsman is, to return to their homes in despair, and thus spread tales of their defeat...that is enough to demand respect for the name of Sepaeda."

Huh, I didn't think of it that way. For His Fathership, that's probably the right way to use me.

"Further, the rumored Caputo ace and the son-in-law of Batterabbe are also likely stronger than is readily believable. However, aside from those specific examples, the definition of 'the greatest' for most people isn't that impressive. There simply isn't that large a gap between average people. At the very least, under the assumption that they all receive the same education."

Those words hit a bit too close to home. As my Master said, of course you'd be powerful after five hundred years of training, and it's hard to say it's particularly impressive if all you can do is beat up on those younger than yourself.

"However, there is still meaning to being number one. Everyone seeks to be number one, and tries to displace the current holder of that title or will try to make that number one their own. That is the value of being the best, or of holding the title of 'the greatest.'"

It has value because everyone seeks it, and so there is value in being sought after. I see. That's a good point. Even I told 'God' all those years ago that I wanted to be the greatest, without any hesitation whatsoever.

"This is a good opportunity. If, in a million to one chance, someone appears that surpasses him, then we will go out of our way to welcome them, and if there is one who is talented enough to make Sansui accept their potential, then we'll have him train them. That's all there is to it."

That alone isn't in conflict with my Master's words. 'The greatest' is a goal and an ideal. I, without any backing, have earned a place as a bodyguard for a daughter of one of the Four Great Houses, and my strength is guaranteed by the current and previous lord of the House. If they can defeat me, then no doubt they'd be able to gain renown. That's the goal in mind as people gather here.

"Lord Emeritus... May I ask you a question?"

"Mm? Tahlan? What is it?"

"What do you think of our kingdom, where the strongest becomes king?"

I wonder why he's asking that. Taking a break from his training, Tahlan is posing his inquiry with a serious expression.

"I think nothing of it. That must be the easiest way to put it. Besides, we have House Caputo, where one cannot inherit the title without Holy Power. There is nothing barbaric about your custom."

"...I see."

"It makes no difference who becomes king. In which case, there is no problem in the strongest being king."

Now that's quite the statement to make to a royal from a far-off kingdom. Well, I suppose this is nothing new; this man's pretty dismissive even of his own king.

"There are those who prattle on about how those with ability should become king, but for most people there's just not that much difference between their respective abilities. Or do you mean to suggest that there is a gap such as the one that exists between Sansui and the average person, or between the Caputo ace and the average person, between those who become kings and those who do not?"

Is there that significant of a difference between the most able member of the Royal Family and those who are second or third most able? That's a difficult question to answer.

"Say, hypothetically, that the most able one does not become king, and an inferior individual takes the throne. What is the one who didn't get the crown to do? Are they to give up and retire? Or perhaps despair at the injustice of the world and commit suicide? Can you truly say that one like that, without a desire to serve their kingdom, is truly 'able?'"

The prince who abandoned his kingdom listens in silence.

"If you take the appropriate time and effort to determine it, most people have their use. There are many who say that birth is important, but in the end it's not an issue of blood, but of how they are raised. And for most individuals, if you educate them properly, you can find those who can contribute. However, regardless of whether we talk about royalty or any other thing to inherit, if you increase the number of candidates, there's no reasonable place to end it. Because, in the end, it doesn't matter that much."

Essentially, it's a matter of cost. If you provide the highest-quality education, most people will manifest a useful talent. If you provide that opportunity to many people, you can find those with outstanding abilities. However, the question is whether or not the returns are worth the cost.

"The worst example is our neighboring country, where simply changing the ruler splits the country. There is no country that becomes stronger from a civil war. People who die remain dead. Even if many royals die in the process of sorting out a succession dispute, that's still fewer dead than in a war. That's the limit of how bad it can get."

"...I see."

"The important thing is the country, the state. It's not the Royal Family. If a kingdom rots due to a rotten king, that simply means that the rest of the kingdom was already rotten."

"Wow... That really is a Sepaeda way of thinking."

Hearing his words, Happine twists her expression into one of distaste. Certainly, it's a harsh statement. It's probably not something the former head of one of the Four Great Houses should be saying.

"...I will not take offense, as my brother is not offended, but is this the culture of House Sepaeda itself?"

"Yup, that's what it is. Both House Sepaeda and House Disaea are thoroughly about competition. While they allow those with ability to flourish, they're equally quick to disown those without a use."

Sunae and Happine chat casually, while making clear their displeasure with His Fathership.

"In House Caputo's case, it can't really be helped, because there's a birth component involved with the Mystic Arts, but House Batterabbe is probably the most conservative. We have a great number of families that have served us for generations."

I'm told that the Four Great Houses and the Royal Family are discussing the future of the Caputo realm.

I really do wonder if it will come down to all-out war. It's very worrying.

Part 14 — Apex

A thoroughly ravaged land, or to put it another way, a pointlessly tilled field. The humidity is a bit higher than usual, but other than that, there are no signs of life before them, leaving a wasteland comparable to a desert.

Standing before the site of the bombing, near the House Caputo lands, are Shouzo, his escorts, Paulette, and the Lord Marshal, all silent. Despite it being over ten days since the battle, the party is here to accompany Shouzo, who has insisted on going to the site every day.

“...I thought I would feel a little more guilty.”

Having destroyed everything all by himself, Shouzo still can't acknowledge the reality of the sight in front of him. It's as though this area has been like this for hundreds of years, maybe even thousands. He can almost believe that he had no hand in creating this reality.

“Hey, Paulette, this was the right thing to do, right? This was what was best for this kingdom, for the Caputo lands, right?”

“...Yes, that's correct. You acted exactly as we asked. Thank you.”

A single individual decided the fate of tens of thousands of lives. In a sense, that's the fundamental nature of politics. At the very least, the new leader of the invading Domino Empire had ordered tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, to kill them and pillage their resources. That could be said to be the right decision for his nation.

Which would make the decision reached by House Caputo's leadership, Paulette included, to order the thorough destruction of this land, tens of thousands of lives and all, to have been right, as well. The only unusual element of that is the existence of Shouzo himself, an individual capable of killing those tens, even hundreds of thousands, all on his own.

“Alright.”

He didn't push any further on the question. It was something that had to be done, after all. It was something that had to be done the way it was. And it was something only he could have done. If he had not used his magic, if he hadn't killed them all, then the fortress city would have fallen, and more of the Caputo lands would have been exposed to the ravages of war. The consequences, in the number of victims, the number of dead, the number of tragedies, would have been unimaginable.

Still, was there really a need to so thoroughly kill the enemy? It wasn't as though he experienced zero excitement at being able to really use his magic for the first time. It's not that there hadn't been a worry that he'd hesitate, allow the enemy to approach too close, and accidentally catch the fortress city in his blast radius.

However, even then, was it really necessary to kill them all? Was there really a need to so thoroughly kill them to the point where not only were there no bodies, there's no trace of the army ever having existed.

It's not that he doesn't wonder.

“I'm glad to hear that.”

But that's not something for him to think about.

At a minimum, as a result, there were no deaths incurred by Caputo's population. They managed to maintain that, at the bare minimum. That also means that concerns beyond that must be complicated, and therefore not something for him to think about or struggle with.

"Forgive me, Shouzo. I've made you do such terrible..."

"Don't worry about it. It really didn't feel real to me."

Despite Paulette's apology, despite seeing the sight in front of him, Shouzo is still unable to absorb the reality of the situation. He thought he had an excessive amount of power, sure. Everyone told him that he was dangerous, after all. But he didn't think it was *this much*.

"But...I guess this is what it takes to defend a country."

"...That is my role. It shouldn't have to be yours."

"That's not true. I've entrusted my power to you and the other people of House Caputo, which means I do what House Caputo commands. Your job is to decide, and my job is to use magic. So this is also my job."

The world's most powerful mage smiles at the daughter of House Caputo as he replies.

"I believe that it's much better that you and the people of House Caputo decide rather than for me to think it over and decide for myself. Even if it ends up being a mistake, I won't blame you. I think everyone would end up making the same mistake, in that case."

Smiling awkwardly with his scarred face, he has faith that he and House Caputo are in the right. Hearing that is a balm to his escort, at least. Yes, even if he is the world's most powerful mage, his power is not something that should be left to his own discretion.

"An excellent understanding of your responsibility, oh 'Scarred Fool.' A sign of your unwavering loyalty."

Around ten carriages and their cavalry escort appear in the 'wastelands,' and a particularly commanding man in their midst speaks to Shouzo. Still, at the stranger's address, Shouzo simply looks back at the man quizzically. Obviously, not everyone has seen the man before. But everyone else present freezes a little at seeing his clothing and family crest.

"...Hey, Paulette. Who's this guy that just started talking to me?"

"His Majesty, the King!" says Paulette, who actually has met the king before, nearly screaming as she also tenses up in respect.

"...Why is he all the way out here?!"

While Shouzo doesn't know the king's face, he's not so ignorant as to not know about the *concept* of a king. He hurriedly stiffens his posture and does his best to imitate Paulette's respectful demeanor.

"We are here to convene a council of state, but the consensus was that we had best witness the results of the 'Scarred Fool' and his magic."

At the word *consensus*, Shouzo's escorts all break out in a cold sweat. Given the circumstances, it was easy enough to imagine the members

whose opinions made up that consensus. It would mean that, in addition to the king, all four heads of the Great Houses were also present.

"A basic maxim of war is to see for oneself what the enemy sees," says the youngest of the four, the current Lord Sepaeda, his eyes the most intense of those gathered.

"Quite. That is the whole purpose of having the council here, in Caputo, rather than in the capital," says Lord Batterabbe, who is old enough to be Lord Sepaeda's father.

"We were the ones who made the decision and the ones who gave the order. Given that, it's only right that we should visit this place, as you have," says a man known to Shouzo, the current head of House Caputo and Paulette's uncle.

"Indeed, indeed... One can only appraise a product with one's own eyes. Including the man who carried out this action," says the oldest man among them, the king included...Lord Disaea.

The top leaders of the kingdom are assembled in this location, and Shouzo's escort can't contain their shock. This was because it also meant that the escorts of those leaders, the cream of this kingdom's 'conventional forces,' were necessarily present as well.

"A bold move, Caputo. I can do naught but praise your decisiveness," Lord Sepaeda states boldly, offering his opinion from a perspective of inherent superiority.

He has acknowledged that the sight before him is the result of deliberate and clear intent.

"Thorough destruction even beyond what is necessary to eliminate the enemy. An effective use of your capabilities."

"...It was a fight with no room for weakness. As one who has been entrusted with his power, I had to decide on a course of action that went beyond simple certainty."

Lord Caputo accepts Lord Sepaeda's comment with a sour expression. In truth, there were less extreme options available. There's no significant difference between total massacre and simple area destruction for the 'Cursed Farmer.' Meaning that, rather than ordering him to completely destroy the enemy, they could have shown them his power, in order to frighten them into retreating.

"It was a difficult choice to make, but it was not an option to show mercy to those who chose to pick up a sword and pillage, rather than hold out their hand for help in the face of famine."

Hypothetically, they could have been restrained in their use of the world's most powerful mage and, rather than killing them all, only destroyed half the army.

Would that army then have retreated in an orderly manner? Most certainly not. Over half of that army would likely have deserted from the army and become bandits, who would then prey upon the realm. Their entire purpose behind the invasion was the famine at home, after all. Even if

they were to retreat, it's doubtful they had enough food for the return trip. And to them, this was enemy territory. It's doubtful they'd have any hesitation in ravaging the realm.

"I chose to completely destroy the enemy to protect my subjects. Further, I didn't want to risk losing Shouzo."

"A perfectly reasonable fear. Even the world's most powerful mage is still human. It's entirely possible for a randomly thrown rock to kill him."

The nickname of the 'Scarred Fool' is neither mistaken nor camouflage. It simply points out that he's a man who's nearly destroyed himself with his own magic on several occasions. There's probably no other man in the world so capable of accidentally killing himself.

"If I had placed him on the ground to stand and fight, there would have been a risk of losing him. I prioritized the life of a single mage instead of those who had a home to return to. And if we were to attack them, then it needed to be as thorough as possible."

The king, the four lords of the Great Houses, and their escorts then take a moment to look over the world's most powerful mage and the land behind him. The scars left on the earth as a result of his work could scarcely be believed as the work of a single person.

"A show of force... With their entire army destroyed, no doubt anyone from the Domino Empire would understand from this scene what befell their army. Even if they can't grasp what precisely happened here, they would know that their entire army was slaughtered, to a man, with overwhelming force. That a massacre far beyond the normal concept of war had happened here."

Lord Batterabbe interpreted this scene thusly. It was doubtful that anyone from the Domino Empire could even step foot in these lands. Even if an ignorant army were to wander across this blasted wasteland, just seeing what lay before them would induce a strong sense of something beyond the ordinary, and they would likely turn back. This devastated wasteland was now a defensive deterrent more effective at breaking an invader's morale than any fortress could ever be.

"Deterrence, spurred on by the power possessed by the world's most powerful mage, is an ideal way to end the conflict."

"Indeed, indeed. War is unprofitable. It's not worth playing along with an immature fool's recklessness."

Old man Disaea agrees with the sentiment of Lord Batterabbe's statement. War is, to him, absurd. So many valuable things are wasted. Swords are broken, arrows are spent, soldiers die, all on an enormous scale. There are times when war is necessary, of course, but it's still best to maintain such a war effort at a bare minimum even then. And in those cases, it's best to do so with every advantage. Full-scale war is completely inefficient. It's the very definition of incurring high costs with minimal benefit.

"Having seen this, they'll likely sue for peace, and quickly."

The old man's words represented the consensus of all present. Even Shouzo was considering it a matter of simply doing the same thing again in case there was another invasion.

Yes, the war was over. The Domino Empire no longer had the ability to fight, and the Arcana Kingdom had no reason to fight.

"...We are gathered here to make that decision."

However, there were reasons why this would end up being a problem for the Royal House of Arcana.

It's impossible to know where in the world one could find monsters such as the Young Apostle, or his master. At the very least, the man responsible for bringing down the Domino Empire and formed the Domino Republic must be such a man. None of the five men making up the supreme leadership of the Arcana Kingdom underestimated the potential held by a single individual. However, based on the circumstances, there are some things that are now certain.

"The new Domino regime defeated the old regime in a civil war, then sent their army to fight us. That means that they likely don't have the power to single-handedly destroy a wide swath of land like Shouzo, nor do they have the ability to flawlessly assassinate someone like Sansui. That's clear from the circumstances."

A keystone in the defense of the kingdom, the Caputo fortress city... Even if it is an important fortress, for the most important leaders of the kingdom to assemble in the location closest to the enemy border... That's just not something that should happen in a time of war. However, after witnessing the power of the Caputo ace directly, this is not a factor that any of them take into consideration. If Shouzo wanted to destroy the kingdom, there's no place that would be safe for any of them.

"As such, there is nothing for them to do. The new regime invaded our kingdom because they had 'no other choice,' as they put it, and they mobilized an army as their 'best option' under those circumstances. Given that we have destroyed that army, I doubt they have any further options."

All present accepted Lord Sepaeda's arrogant statement. Hypothetically, if the enemy had an 'ace' like Shouzo or Sansui, there would have been no civil war and thus there would have been no foreign war. The enemy chose war as their best and last resort, which means that there is no way for the Arcana Kingdom to lose. No matter how many times they invade, Shouzo can use his overwhelming power to destroy their armies.

"The enemy leader is, at best, as an individual on the level of House Batterabbe's son-in-law. Meaning that he doesn't rise to the level of a kingdom-level threat. Meaning there is only one response for us to take. To ignore them. If we simply wait, they will sue for terms."

Lord Sepaeda's summation, arrogant though it was, was also perfectly logical and beyond dispute. At the very least, it was a more peaceful solution than a counter-invasion and all the attendant destruction.

“What happens next is up to them. All we have to do is watch their actions and wait. Things will simply get worse for them as time goes by.”

Simply put, the Domino Republic had lost many soldiers. They’d let a massive number of their own citizens die. In this world, soldiers serve as both army and law enforcement. Even if they are conscripts, if they lose tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of lives among their combat-ready people, it would be next to impossible to gather more forces. In fact, if too many people from various regions die, it could make it difficult to maintain the current regime.

“The worst possible thing to do on our end would be to invade. If we do so, at worst, we risk giving them an enemy to rally against. Further, the enemy is in a position where it’s questionable if they can survive the winter. There will be serious logistical problems if we invade in a situation where we can’t rely on local foraging.”

Listening to Lord Sepaeda’s explanation until the end, the other lords nod in agreement.

“Indeed, indeed... War is a transaction that costs far too much to willingly participate in. If there is no benefit to be gained, then only a fool would bother,” Old Man Disaea, the oldest man present, says as he laughs.

Everything has a risk and a cost and those have to be considered when seeking profit. There’s no such thing as a transaction with no risk, only profit. That only means the risk hasn’t been adequately accounted for. Further, war is simply too costly. Even if a war that cannot be lost is a war without risk, if the rewards of victory are small, then it’s still not worth the cost.

“There’s little to be gained from cutting away such poor land. Simply consider how much investment it would take to restore it. And there’s not much worth to having land on the other end of the kingdom.”

Unlike House Caputo, which shares a border with the Domino Republic, House Disaea’s lands are on the opposite side of the realm. Even in the worst possible case, there is little chance that House Disaea suffers anything from the Domino Republic’s invasion.

“With all respect, Your Majesty, I believe that focusing solely on defense would be ideal.”

Even as he considers that there’d be no possibility that the crown would desire otherwise, Lord Batterabbe adds his agreement to the others. Simply participating in this war is a loss.

“The cause of this war stems from the misconception that the defecting nobles brought most of their nation’s wealth to this kingdom. With time, no doubt they will calm down, and return to ordinary relations with us. The problem, if anything, is the other neighboring countries. If we focus too intently on Domino, they may very well launch an incursion of their own across our borders.”

House Batterabbe's ace, Saiga, is both extremely flexible and powerful. With the ability to strengthen himself with Eckesachs, he could single-handedly match the Sword and Shield Companies.

But that's his limit. He's unbelievably strong for an individual, and there are few situations he isn't equipped to handle. However, he is not as obscenely powerful as the aces of the other three Great Houses. In the event of a war with a neighboring kingdom, it'd be possible to lose him.

"Offering to negotiate is, I believe, a sign of a great power."

It's impossible to know what they'd do if they were pushed into a corner. That uncertainty, of whether they'd lash out from an unexpected direction, is concerning.

"Your Majesty, in war, it is certainly important to begin it correctly, but equally important is how it ends. Fortunately we have both heaven and earth upon our side, and as such I believe this is a time for composure."

Lord Caputo falls in with the consensus opinion. Sharing a border with Domino, Lord Caputo is the one with the most at stake and the one with the greatest responsibility to commit forces. Moreover, his force of paladins — those elite Rare Arts users — would be extremely difficult to replenish if they were to incur major losses.

In a defensive war, it's only necessary to mobilize Shouzo and his escort. However, in the event of conquest and occupation, it's no longer possible to rely entirely on the world's most powerful mage. Infantry can't defeat a bomber. However, a bomber also can't take the place of infantry.

"First, we must start by reopening negotiations. No doubt, after seeing Shouzo's impact, the enemy is intimidated, and will not be quite so confident. I believe it would be best to seek new points of compromise from there."

All of the Four Great Houses are cautioning against further fighting. The enemy has something to surrender, after all: four of the Eight Sacred Treasures, more than worthy items to be offered as reparations. If they turn over one or two out of the four, that would be quite enough. All present thought it would be sufficient if the Royal Family could gain those treasures. At the same time, all of the lords present had also realized that the crown wouldn't be satisfied with that outcome.

"Which reminds me, Caputo. It seems you have him well-trained. He does appear to be rather dim, but he knows the meaning of gratitude. It's a sign that you are treating him well."

"Sepaeda... I'm sincerely glad to hear you say that, yet I'm afraid there is still plenty that troubles me. His character is weak, and he is also rather careless. I constantly worry that he will do himself harm."

"I have no doubt. If anything, I believe it's our ace that is out of the ordinary."

Despite witnessing Shouzo's destructive power, all present have all maintained a certain degree of confidence in their position, but Lord Sepaeda is by far the most confident. He still maintains absolute confidence

in Sansui, even in the face of witnessing the incredible, unthinkable scale of destruction wrought by the world's most powerful mage.

"It's only natural for power to lead to arrogance, for that is the nature of power. In terms of individual strength, all of 'them' are far superior to those of us here. In such a case, they will certainly try to act as they please. In that sense, I have absolute confidence in Sansui. I have only known him for five or so years, but in those years I have never been disappointed by him, not once."

While he has the least destructive power of the aces, the Young Sword Apostle is the most 'reliable' force. It was impossible to imagine commanding him to do a task and having him fail.

"If he were to fail in a task I gave him, I have no doubt no one else could possibly succeed at it. His character is the furthest possible from negligence and overconfidence. I can stand assured in anything I ask of him. Simply having strength makes one worthy of use, but having both strength and honor makes one worthy of trust. However, trust requires reason. The greater the power, the greater the amount of reason required. He possesses that."

A firm foundation of trust... Hearing that, the other lords of the Great Houses, while different in extent...look upon Lord Sepaeda with envy. Lord Batterabbe's was at least someone restrained, but the other two were obvious in their jealousy.

"Indeed, I'm quite sure the reason the other Houses possess a risky 'ace' is to compete against Sansui. Ordinarily, the way to deal with one who possesses unreliable power is to kill them."

And, more than any other House, the Crown was by far the most envious.

"Sansui is 'the greatest' by any measure in this kingdom. To do something that he is incapable of doing is how one might establish themselves as the greatest in turn. That is, in essence, evidence that everyone envies and fears his power, and admits that he is the greatest hero in the realm."

Yes, the crown realizes that their honor has been besmirched, but the ultimate warrior, with no imperfections, the greatest swordsman and absolute guardian... The crown strongly desires to have him on their side.

"The same goes for the most powerful mage. Their roles are different, meaning his existence does nothing to change Sansui's value. He continues to be one of the greatest. If there is a better, more trustworthy ace, than it's likely that they would have been revealed by now. Is that not true, O Disaea the Venerable?"

"Mm... Who can say? The value of aces isn't always in showing them off. There is meaning in simply hinting at their existence."

At the very least, Lord Batterabbe has been actively promoting Saiga's presence. Meaning that, on one hand, he hopes that Saiga may defeat Sansui eventually, but that he is also not a potential source of embarrassment by being out in public. The same can be said of Lord

Caputo, but it's clear enough that the ace that Lord Disaea supposedly possesses is not a person to put on display.

"But I suppose now is hardly the time to boast about one's ace. What is important is how we settle this war. All we need to do is force them to turn over one of the Sacred Treasures. That's the end of it."

Sansui, who easily defeated a man capable of wielding all of the Arts, wielding a Sacred Sword. With such a man as his ace, Lord Sepaeda says as much without any concerns. Indeed, even if they can't use it, the Sacred Treasure would still be a fine ornament for the Crown.

"There is someone we wish to introduce to those present."

With that, the king summons a woman to him. Lord Caputo is familiar with her, but she's unknown to the other three.

"My name is Hari. I am one of the imperial nobles fortunate enough to have found shelter in your realm after the fall of the Domino Empire."

Hari, daughter of Nuri. As Nuri can't show his face in front of members of the main Caputo line, his daughter is addressing this council of state.

"...Oh, one of the failed curs."

"Come, that is going too far. She is His Majesty's guest, after all."

In response to Lord Sepaeda's obvious disdain, Lord Caputo mildly reproaches him. Still, it was still a surprise to him that the crown had brought her to the meeting.

"...I am loath to expose the Empire's shame, but when His Imperial Majesty, the glorious previous Emperor, passed away six years ago, there was a dispute over who would inherit the throne. Many of the Imperial House fell to assassins during that time, but there was one lady who could not be accounted for among His Majesty's concubines. Had she been pregnant at the time, she would have carried His Imperial Majesty's grandchild."

Hearing the words "six years ago," Lord Sepaeda's brows raise.

"The lady was quite beautiful, and was known for her silver hair."

A child with silver hair. At that remark, all present looked to Lord Sepaeda. That is, they're all aware of the Young Sword Apostle's only family, the sole reason he came to the mortal world from the woods.

"After following the lady's path, a young man who stood upon a tree branch deep in the woods informed us that he had buried the lady and given her child to his apprentice..."

"Ah. Sansui's master, Suiboku."

Lord Sepaeda sighs deeply. He knows that this will be a truly bothersome problem.

"Your Majesty. I hesitate to ask... But you mean to suggest that this refers to Sansui's daughter, Lain?" Lord Batterabbe asks, cautiously.

All present are aware it's an extremely problematic revelation. In the worst case, they could very well make an enemy of Sansui.

"Do you intend to use her as a figurehead to restore the Empire?"

“...That would be beyond reckless. To support an emperor, a head of state...that requires placing your full backing of the entire country behind them, as well. Where exactly are we to find those funds?”

“Even if Sansui is the kingdom’s greatest swordsman, his daughter only has the backing of House Sepaeda. To make such a child an emperor...”

Batterabbe, Disaea, and Caputo... The lords all try to determine the king’s intent. It would be one thing if this were a special bloodline like House Caputo’s with the Mystic Arts inherent in the family, but to back her for the throne on the basis of simply having silver hair is ridiculous. It’s a dangerous move that risks making an enemy of Sansui, the greatest swordsman, and simultaneously there is no benefit to reasonably expect from going through with it.

“We have not made a decision on this matter.”

The king is well aware of those facts, and he actually doesn’t have any intention of making such a move.

At those words, Hari’s eyes widen, but she remains silent, unable to comment.

“However... There are two salient facts. First, the new regime thoroughly loathes the Imperial House, and has been going around killing those of the imperial bloodline hiding within their Republic. Second, the head of the new regime possesses the Sacred Treasures.”

“The Demon Blade, Dainsleif...”

“Indeed, Sepaeda. The Sacred Treasure that allows its wielder to wipe out an entire bloodline, the Demon Blade, Dainsleif. Given that it is in the hands of their new leader, once they finish killing the members of the Imperial House within their own country, they will then extend their reach to our realm. With Sansui, the greatest swordsman, protecting her himself, I doubt they will succeed. However... They will most certainly make the attempt. Further, even if we make demands in a peace negotiation, that is perhaps the only Treasure they will not hand over.”

The Demon Blade, Dainsleif, was one of the Eight Sacred Treasures and a weapon that drains the blood of anyone it injures. It’s said that the weapon allows its wielder to identify the kin of those the wielder bears a grudge against.

“So, what shall we do, Sepaeda?”

“I’m afraid I must take this home for consideration.”

Part 15 — Trust

“Um... Begging your pardon, but could you increase the intensity of our training?”

A man receiving instruction from Sansui makes the request. Having already challenged Sansui multiple times, and being well aware of Sansui's strength, the man nevertheless asks this of a man who looks younger than him. Hearing those words, Sansui feels a bit of regret. He understands the man's feelings, but even so, there are no shortcuts on the path of the sword.

In the end, it becomes a matter of how much time they can dedicate to their effort. It's a question of endurance. The greatest examples of that are himself and his Master. Thinking about that fundamental truth, he feels something that he can't quite name as he looks at the powerful man in front of him.

“Please, provide me with instruction.”

“I understand what you are feeling, but I'm afraid our school doesn't have anything in the way of more intense training. It may be difficult to believe, but I've never sparred with my own Master.”

“T-Truly...?”

Sansui Shirokuro, the world's greatest swordsman and House Sepaeda retainer... He actually turned out to be, in fact, the greatest. That is, in itself, a happy discovery, but that leaves those with a certain level of skill unsatisfied.

Do practice swings. Correct your posture and your movements. Once that's finished, confirm that they can do it reliably in battle through sparring. That process is fine, of course. However, those who have already managed that seek even greater heights.

“Then, please, I ask to face you directly.”

Things that they can do against inferior opponents...well. Start moving before the opponent moves, then take them down before they attack. Or, hit the opponent before they realize their attack has missed.

A mastery of fighting that allows one to reliably perform a technique against whoever one might face, however many opponents one may fight at once. They have confidence in their skill and are unrivaled back home. A swordsman who can defeat them, however many of them face him at once. They wanted as much instruction from him as possible.

“A sparring match?”

“I will not ask that you face me one-on-one. I would even be fine with watching you fight. I would like to watch you fight more often.”

For Sansui, he can't help but think it's all pointless, as it would simply reinforce the awareness of the gap between himself and the others.

At the very least, those who face him, as well as those who watch him, may be impressed, but none of them really understand. Because he can read that from their presence, he feels that it wouldn't have much meaning. He only demonstrated his skill to have them understand the gap and to see

what it looks like when one can actually execute a technique in any situation. He can't see the meaning in showing it to them multiple times.

Further, when watching him fight, it's nearly impossible to grasp the timing, as he's already completely mastered it. To seek out his timing is difficult even for those who have reached a certain standard. Or perhaps it was actually impossible, considering that even the Grand Commander of the Royal Guard, who stood at the pinnacle of humanity, couldn't even get a sniff of that unknowable presence.

"Don't be so hasty, Sansui. You are too quick to turn the corner."

As Sansui ponders this, the Lord Emeritus of House Sepaeda offers advice from the spectator's seats.

"You still have much to learn as an instructor. There is still plenty for them to gain from facing you."

"However, that also comes with a certain level of danger. I can't see how that is worth the pain."

"That's fine. You're sensitive to their presence, so no doubt you can feel it. The passion that burns in them to reach for becoming the greatest, something neither the genius Blois nor your Master ever had."

"That is..."

"Indulge them. Show them how the greatest swordsman fights, just as your Master showed you. There's no need to hold back. You may have reached enlightenment, but to the men there, the current moment is what matters. Don't dismiss that, and face them with all you have. That is what it means to answer their earnestness."

Even after putting in all their effort into their training, the number of people who could ever achieve mastery of timing is still limited. Even if they could master timing, it's not as though they could consistently control it, and failure to do so means certain death. In which case, is it not better to be an ordinary swordsman? Lord Sepaeda is admonishing Sansui's thoughts in that direction.

"Live by the sword and die by the sword. At the very least, that's how you are, yes?"

"That goes without saying, but..."

"The same goes for them. As such, there is only one thing for you to do."

"...Very well. That is how I will work with them."

Drawing his wooden sword from his hip, he turns to those ready to face him.

"This will hurt, and the pain may be all you gain from this. If you don't mind that, then face me."

The people receiving instruction from me all look older than I am. That is, they are all grown men, but they have a certain sparkle in their eyes. What I want to say is that they're enjoying the glow of youth.

As I struggle with that, I wait for the current lord of House Sepaeda with the parties from House Batterabbe and House Sepaeda. Their presences are

already perceptible, and the emotions I feel aren't particularly cheerful. Lord Batterabbe is also with them.

"So, how did it go? Did your apprentices learn something from watching you fight?"

"It may be because onlookers can see more of what happens than the participants themselves, but it seems that they are beginning to grasp the meaning of timing by watching my matches."

It was exactly as His Fathership had said. Honestly, the thought would never have occurred to me. Even if they couldn't read my timing, though, they can read the timing of the other participants, and then they observe how I respond to that timing, and try to emulate me. I honestly thought that it would be more efficient to focus on practice swings and kata lessons, but it seems that sparring has a value all its own.

"And they have passion... Something that was lacking in my life."

When I first came to this world — that is, me from five hundred years ago — I thought I could simply become the greatest by asking God for it. However, I eventually learned the pleasure of learning the sword while training under my Master, and discovered the joy of self-improvement.

But in the process, I stopped thinking that I wanted to defeat someone specific or to become the greatest. I keep saying this, but the desire to win, the desire to defeat someone, getting fired up for that really just dulls your blade.

Retaining my composure at all times, being able to wield my blade as though in practice even in duels and battles to the death... If I don't do that, even if I grasp the timing, my thoughts will make victory slip through my fingers.

"...I had never felt any emotion that intense."

In thinking about their lives, I thought that they shouldn't seek to reach my realm of skill. Even if they want to be the greatest, the mastery of timing is difficult, and therefore they would be happiest giving up and moving on. But perhaps that was presumptuous on my part.

That they could very well die tomorrow... That's not something I, who have lived five hundred years, should have thought about.

"Hey, Saiga. You and I both loved those sorts, the guys with the jock mindset who were really focused and dedicated to self-improvement, right?"

"...Yeah, I loved them, too."

"Perhaps we have both been presumptuous, due to having acquired a certain type of greatness. Their lives are their own, after all, no matter how hard, no matter how much they'll regret it. I guess they want to live true to their passions."

That is, in the end, the real value of being the greatest. But having heard that, even secondhand from my Master, I had ended up looking down upon them.

"My Master is definitely great. He must have considered that I'd go through this, too, and that's why he told me to take on apprentices."

"Yeah, I agree."

"...Saiga, Tahlan. Both of you...I'm sure it'll get harder starting tomorrow, but will you stay my apprentices?"

It was a stupid question and I was fishing for an answer.

"Of course, do your worst."

"Master Sansui... Those were the words I wanted to hear!"

Hearing those words was such a balm and... But then I immediately snapped back to reality.

"...I beg your pardon, Lord Saiga, Prince Tahlan. I feel I just said something very disrespectful."

"Don't worry about it! I mean, I'm your apprentice, and you're actually the oldest one here, right?"

"Indeed, I would prefer you interact with me in that fashion!"

Yes, I know the two of them are happy. But that's not the issue. Both Lady Douve and Saiga's harem are glaring daggers at me.

At this rate, I'm going to get stabbed in the back!

"Sansui... I thought you were a man who understood your place. How disappointing."

"L-Lady Douve! My apologies!"

"To treat my man so casually... No doubt you were already treating him like that in your inner thoughts, weren't you?"

"Please forgive me!"

Oh no, Lady Douve's really getting angry. Meanwhile, Saiga's getting cornered by his own masters.

"Saiga! You're my fiancée! Why are you being so chummy with Douve's bodyguard and forming such a perfect master-apprentice relationship?!"

"Saiga, it's a good thing that you are at the same school as my brother, but don't neglect me in the process!"

"L-Lord Saiga... Do you prefer the company of men over women...?"

"Saiga, my wielder, don't be so taken with Suiboku's apprentice! Just because you have the Immortal Presence, do you plan to hole up in a mountain?! Don't even think about it!"

"C-Calm down everyone! Especially you, Zuger! Please, calm down!"

This is bad. Blois can't respond forcefully to Lady Douve! Lain's cowering, too! This is hopeless!

"My maaaaan?! You son of... You put your hands on her, didn't you?!"

"Such intensity! And this level of swordsmanship, given your age. To so easily defeat this ability so regularly, my Master must indeed be quite impressive! Very well, then! I will restrain him without use of Shadow Summoning!"

His Fathership is attacking him, but Tahlan's trying his best to deal with it optimistically.

Oh no, at this rate this'll end up an international incident!

"Lady Douve! Prince Tahlan is in trouble! Perhaps you should focus on restraining His Fathership?!"

"No, with Tahlan's skill, he'll be able to hold off Father's sword...long enough to punish you first, certainly."

It's no use, she's in the same sort of rage that His Brotherhood and His Fathership sometimes get into!

"...Oh, damn!"

"...The room is quite a mess. Was there another problem?"

"It's always lively here, isn't it? Happiness, you shouldn't be so boisterous while we're at Sepaeda's estate."

After a bit of trouble, we've welcomed the lords of House Sepaeda and House Batterabbe into the Sepaeda estate. Other than Blois and Lain, everyone's hair is out of order. However, we're all still in one piece, so I suppose that will have to do.

"It's nothing. So, what happened, son?"

"Ah, we have a bit of a complication. In the worst case, it could be a matter of dishonor."

His Brotherhood and Lord Batterabbe look upon Lain and I with concern. Lain is still cowering from the pandemonium earlier, but evidently that isn't the problem. The others are one thing, but it's hard to imagine that Lain and I would ever be a political problem.

"Eckesachs, there was something I wanted to ask you. Do you know of the Demon Blade, Dainsleif, another of the Eight Sacred Treasures?"

"Certainly. The king of a country named Domino owns them, yes?"

Domino is currently a republic, so king is the wrong term. It was once an empire, so the correct title would be emperor. But I suppose that, from Eckesachs's perspective, it's a country that was established after splitting with my master, and the difference probably doesn't matter much to her. If there's a country and there's a person at the top, I suppose that's a king to her.

"Do you know its capabilities? If the legends are true, it has the ability to find the blood relatives of those you hate."

"Technically, it's the ability to find the relatives of those whose blood it's tasted. While an Immortal's presence sensing is mostly useful for defense, Dainsleif can seek out its target wherever they might be."

"...I see, that explains it. The new head of Domino is using that power to look for members of the Imperial House."

That's a creepy searching ability. It's useful, I suppose, but it's much too malicious. I suppose using it to cut off this sort of political issue is the right way to go about it, but it's still an awful ability.

"Lain, you were picked up in those woods by Suiboku and Sansui. Neither of them knows anything about your life prior to that, is that right?"

"Y-Yes, your lordship..."

"For better or for worse, we now know your roots. You are evidently a member of the Imperial House, the one that ruled Domino before the revolution and fled after."

Huh? Lain's a member of the Domino Imperial House?

I'm surprised and Lain doesn't seem to understand what is being said. Everyone else is clearly in shock.

"Ordinarily, Lain's roots would be of no interest to anyone. It's not as though she has abilities from her bloodline like House Caputo or the Saive family, and the only real methods of identification are things like facial features and hair color. We could have simply claimed ignorance and a lack of awareness. However, the new leader of Domino is driven by revenge and is currently going around slaughtering members of the Imperial House."

"Once he finishes eliminating them in his country, he will begin seeking out those who live outside of his borders. At the very least, he has the capability while he's using Dainsleif's powers."

Lord Batterabbe seems concerned, as well. So long as the ruler of Domino doesn't give up, there's the possibility that they'll send assassins simply because Lain is related to the Imperial House. And that wouldn't change, regardless of whether I'm with House Sepaeda or not. She'll continue to be targeted until Lain dies or the Domino head of state chooses to stop.

"From the perspective of national interest, killing Lain is probably the right course of action. Of course, I have no intention of doing such a thing. That would be true even without you, Sansui."

His Lordship, while stating it in characteristic rough fashion, shows his absolute trust of me with an equally absolute statement.

"Indeed, they keep demanding that we produce the emigrant nobles, but we've refused their demands. Given that we won't hand over those pathetic curs, there's no reason we would hand over Lain."

"In that, Batterabbe's opinion is the same. At the very least, our kingdom can presently hold the enemy back due to the power of Caputo's ace. It's impossible for an army to enter our territory at the moment. The only thing to worry about is assassination, but that isn't an issue so long as you are present."

I've been hired by House Sepaeda and am serving as Lady Douve's bodyguard. However, I'm only doing that to raise Lain. At the very least, that's how it was at first.

"With all of that on the table, what do you want to do? Putting aside this kingdom's interests, the quickest path is to assassinate the enemy leader. And of course, there is no one who could stop you. Even if there is one who can stop you, that would be House Disaea's ace and he isn't your enemy."

His words are sincere. I'm able to sense deception through my ability to read presences, but even aside from that, he's speaking to me as an equal. He's giving me a choice. That fact alone makes me happy.

"If there's no other choice, I may do that. However, there are things to do before that. Isn't that so?"

"...I appreciate you saying that. You may have to resort to that in the end, but tolerate it for now. You and Lain have served us loyally. It is time

for me to reward that loyalty, as your liege and employer. I will seek a resolution that won't bring you or the kingdom any loss. Until then, avoid leaving your daughter's side as much as is possible."

From now on, I'll have enemies targeting Lain. That hasn't happened before, but now it's undeniable. There will be those seeking my daughter's life for the sake of fulfilling their vengeance. But, regardless, what I do won't change because of that. Whatever Lain's origins, I decided on my own that I will raise her. I have no intention of letting go of that role.

"Papa... Did I do something wrong?"

"No, it's fine. There's nothing for you to worry about."

Right now everyone here is Lain's ally. That's a very reassuring thing.

Yes, there's nothing to worry about. I tell that to my daughter with certainty.

Part 16 — Introduction

House Caputo, one of the Four Great Houses of the Arcana Kingdom... Along with House Sepaeda, House Batterabbe, and House Disaea, they have the influence second only to the Crown, and own lands nearly as large as the Crown's.

House Caputo's greatest asset is that their bloodline is extremely likely to produce those with the Holy Power required for the Mystic Arts. While not all members of the family are necessarily born with Holy Power, in this House, one in two of their children have the capability when they're born. Given it's a rare talent, one that ordinarily only manifests one in every thousand people, that rate is extraordinary.

The Mystic Arts are defensive in nature, able to create sheltering walls, while also being a healing art that can put right both injury and sickness. Its effectiveness does not change regardless of circumstance, and to put it crudely, it is also a steady source of revenue.

Humans first seek water and grain; and once they have those, they seek alcohol and meat; and once they have those, they will try to obtain money and wealth beyond their ability to spend. Finally, with all of these things in hand, they will seek out honor and rank.

House Caputo has plenty of all of these.

They do receive 'donations' and 'aid' from House Disaea, but even putting that aside, they have more than enough wealth to minister to the poor, and provide free training in the Mystic Arts regardless of the person's origins or circumstances, with plenty left over. Because House Caputo is relatively austere when it comes to personal consumption, their wealth doesn't stand out, but they are extremely economically secure.

In terms of their skill in medicine, they are among the best in the surrounding region, and many important people from nearby countries come to Caputo to receive the highest quality care. Just by taking an 'appropriate fee' from these medical tourists, House Caputo flourishes.

They have no competition, and they require no effort to sell their services. They are nobles who can gain virtue simply by practicing their healing techniques each day, and continually acting with discipline to avoid falling to arrogance.

"Thank you all for traveling so far to gather here today."

The heads of the various cadet branches of House Caputo have assembled in the estate of the main branch, at the invitation of the daughter and heir of the main family, Paulette Caputo. As it is the main branch's estate, Paulette's uncle, the current Lord Caputo, is present, and is standing at her side as she hosts the event.

They have gathered here under the guise of an outdoor party, but based upon her tense expression and a quick glance at the faces of the Lord Marshal of the Paladins and the House Mage flanking her, it's clear to them that they're not here for a mere social call.

Paulette herself is a pious woman, worthy of being a member of the main line, so it's hard to imagine her gathering the heads of the cadet branches simply to hold a party.

"I have invited you to gather here... To discuss the flood that recently happened at a nearby village."

A village nearby was washed away by a flood, and Paulette has been leading the rebuilding efforts; there was nothing unusual about that. However, a cursory investigation revealed oddities with the otherwise normal situation. That is to say, about the flood itself. A disaster where an enormous amount of water washes away a village... Ordinarily, such an event wouldn't be limited to a *single* village.

Further, there are no large rivers near the village, nor have there been any large storms or sustained rains in the area. In short, there was nothing that could cause a flood. Indeed, there was little in the way of human cost, nor was there an enormous amount of damage. But it was impossible to conceal that it hadn't been an ordinary flood.

"I will state this bluntly. The source of the water that washed away the village is due to a single mage, one who possesses an extraordinary amount of mana."

Because of the incident with Canvus, Paulette has chosen to directly state the facts, even if they were difficult to believe.

"The villagers and the village itself were washed away due the mishandling of a water spell by a man with the mana of over ten thousand average mages."

It was, to put it mildly, an extraordinary statement. Even if all of those present were mystics and not particularly educated in magic, the existence of an individual with over ten thousand times the mana of an ordinary person was difficult to believe.

Only that the words came from Paulette, who was widely respected by the others, kept them from bursting out into laughter and instead allowed them to remain silent, seeking to find the truth of the matter.

"...If you please, Shouzo."

"Oh, okay... I mean, yes, my lady!"

Appearing at Paulette's instruction was a black haired and black eyed foreigner with a nervous expression. Those familiar with the appearance of the Young Sword Apostle could not help but steel themselves at seeing him.

"This is Kyoube Shouzo, the mage I just mentioned."

"...H-Hello! I'm a mage!"

He blushes at suddenly being introduced to all of these important people as a mage, but he maintains his posture of attention.

"Let us put the matter to the test... Shouzo, please cast the spell as we discussed."

"So, water first, right?"

"Yes, if you could."

Tense with nerves, he steadies himself. Shouzo raises his right hand and points his index finger to the heavens. Immediately after, all of those present turn their eyes upward in surprise. The entire area turns dark as *something* blocks the sun.

Although not cast in absolute darkness, the party grounds go from clear daylight to the gloom of an overcast sky. Several dozen meters overhead is an enormous pool of water, as though someone had drained a lake into the air above.

Creating water where there was nothing... While the magnitude might be different, it's something that anyone who uses water magic could do. In this case, however, it happened to be done with ten thousand times the normal amount of mana.

"Ah, crap... That's too much."

"C-Calm down! Don't panic and drop it!"

Having produced more water than intended due to raw nerves, he does indeed begin to panic, with his finger still pointed at the sky. The water overhead begins to wobble in response.

The House Mage of House Caputo yells at seeing this, more panicked than Shouzo himself, though that was understandable. If the water were to fall in its current state, it would kill everyone underneath.

"Y-You don't have to yell."

"First, maintain it! Hold it together, got it? You should be able to do it!"

"W-Well, sure..."

"Maintain it! Hold it there! And then use your wind magic to blast the water upward! You should be able to do it!"

The instructions were something that even those without much knowledge of magic knew would ordinarily be quite difficult to accomplish.

"Oh, alright..."

Casting a wind spell while maintaining a water spell, while holding up the water created... For an ordinary mage, that shouldn't be an option.

But reality defied that impossibility. Just as suddenly as the lake had appeared overhead, an enormous gale force wind, powerful enough to scatter the clouds overhead, blasts away the water without so much as ruffling anything on the party grounds.

The heads of the cadet branches stare up at the sky in shock. They suspect for a moment that they had seen an illusion... But the brief rain that showers them from the now cloudless sky proves that what they had seen was real.

"Dang it... I messed up."

Then they turn their gaze back to him. They look at Shouzo, who after firing off two extraordinary displays of magic shows not even the slightest hint of fatigue.

"...I believe you have all understood why I brought you here today. This is... Well, he is the world's most powerful mage, and I have placed him under my care."

How many of them actually heard Paulette's words? All of them look at Shouzo as though they were beholding a monster.

His expression is a mix of embarrassment from his failure, relief at succeeding in fixing the situation, and shyness at being introduced as the 'world's most powerful mage.' They watch him, he who doesn't seem to care how others are looking at him.

"S-Sorry, Paulette... Lady Paulette... I messed up..."

"It's alright... If you could just be quiet for now."

While trusting Paulette, they properly understood that the world's most powerful mage was also too immature to control himself. This was the first time that they began thinking of the 'Scarred Fool' as House Caputo's ace.

"The reason I have assembled you today is concerning Shouzo. I propose that we restrain him with the Hex Arts in order to make certain he doesn't accidentally make use of his enormous magical potential. I do not believe this is a matter I can decide using my own discretion."

Ordinarily, restraints using Hex Arts are something reserved for the very worst criminals. Even if he is not completely innocent, it's not ethical to simply bind him with hexes because he is unable to control himself. While they feel a degree of hesitation at the ethical quandary, the leaders of House Caputo begin nervously discussing the situation with their neighbors.

As Shouzo stands watching the proceedings, a man approaches him: Douverb Saive. From another bloodline with talent for a Rare Art, but as he hails from a family of Hex Artists rather than mystics, he is viewed with fear, not reverence.

"Are you alright with this?"

"What do you mean?"

While understanding that laws are for politicians to decide, Douverb doesn't approve of the proposal to use the Hex Arts in this exceptional case. He will, of course, comply with any formal requests from House Caputo, but by its nature, the Hex Arts also require the consent of the target.

Of course, 'consent' in this case is already half-coerced, considering the alternative, which is why Douverb is conflicted about his role in this case.

"That the terms of the hex placed upon you will be decided without your opinion or wishes."

"Mm..."

Currently the leaders of House Caputo, Paulette included, are engaged in a heated debate. Depending on the outcome, Shouzo may very well end up unable to use his enormous mana for the rest of his life. Even with that understanding, Shouzo doesn't interject his opinion into the discussion.

"Eh, I think I'm more or less okay with it, whatever the outcome."

"May I ask why?"

"Because there are this many people here, but none of them are suggesting that they just kill me."

It would hardly be odd if there had been voices recommending killing Shouzo to eliminate the risk he posed. Indeed, it would have been natural,

considering the scale of the spell he'd just used, the one that very well could have killed them all just moments before. But no one present has put forth that opinion, even though attempting to kill him rather than debate his fate would be entirely plausible.

"...I see. I apologize for troubling you with such a boorish question."

"Nah, it's fine."

"In the end, I am but the executor."

Douverb, who is only loyal to his duties, lets slip just a little bit of his own opinion.

"But I hope that the hex that I place upon you has terms that are in your favor."

Special Episode — Ashtray

"Say, what do you think disasters are?"

Disaea, the tourism spot where all of the evils and desires of the Arcana Kingdom gather. Countless betting dens are spread across its vast lands. This is one of them. Inside is one of those called an 'ace.'

"For example, a drought from a lack of rain. That's a disaster, yeah? But that's not really uncommon. It's a pity for the people, animals, and plants caught up in the drought... But whether or not it's a disaster, well, I have to disagree."

Shun Ukiyo, the man called 'the Thinker.'

"Do you know what a meteor is? It's really the ultimate example, but if I'm going to die to that, well...I can give up, or at least accept it... If anything, I'd consider it a stroke of luck."

He had already completed his job. The gambling den that had swallowed countless desires was now littered with corpses, all of them with expressions of horror on their faces. None of them had an easy death.

"If I could die from something like that, and everyone else died at the same time, well, I think I could handle that. I suppose it's an odd thing to think about...but I don't think it's unusual. I mean, the alternative, it's unpleasant, yeah?"

The one survivor, the one that Shun is speaking to, is not a young maiden unsoiled by the sins of the gambling den. No, she is the wife of the den's former owner, the man who lapped up the fruits of iniquity.

A little past her prime as a woman, she had been thoroughly spoiled by her husband. It's clear from her clothes and makeup that she had lived a life of luxury. Her children were grown, and she should have been preparing to welcome her first grandchildren. Of course, those children and their spouses are now among the corpses littering the floor.

"You wouldn't want to do it, right? Die in agony?"

"Ahh..."

"I certainly wouldn't. And it seems that you're the same."

There's nothing particularly unnatural about each of the corpses, individually. Although, the fact that there are so many of them is rather odd.

"To die in an instant, alongside everyone else, without any warning. Isn't that an ideal death, in a way? To have advanced knowledge of it, well, that doesn't sound appealing. No one can escape death, of course, but if there's a predetermined day for you to die, then knowing about it in advance must be extraordinarily frightening."

He looks over at one of the corpses. Twisted in terror, its head was covered with blood. There were signs it had been struck countless times in the head with a blunt object, and it was clear that that was the cause of death.

"I do think it's wrong to call that sort of thing a disaster, either. Though, really, that's just my opinion."

What caused those wounds? They appear to have been inflicted by a hard, heavy object. That's obvious, even to an amateur. The weapon, too, is obvious. A glass ashtray, covered with blood, lying on the floor near the body.

"I know it's correct from the dictionary's definition, but, well, how do I put it...? There's a...matter of feel."

He'd been killed by being hit repeatedly over the head with a heavy glass ashtray. That isn't rare in itself...

"I suppose I should cut to the chase. To me, 'disaster' connotes something like divine punishment. A punishment for all of the sins and evils you've accumulated over the years. I'm sure you understand, yeah?"

If not for the fact that, for each of the hundred bodies, there's an equal number of glass ashtrays that were used to bludgeon them.

"Exactly what your family just experienced."

All of those working for the operators of this gambling den... All of them had done things deserving of death. She, who just happened to survive, is no exception.

"It's not just one or two mistakes. Crimes repeated so many times that you draw the attention of those around you, and eventually end up eliminated as a result. I believe that 'disaster' is an apt word for that. Of course, I suppose that's taking the criminal's perspective."

She couldn't disagree with him. It wasn't out of the realm of possibility that the entire organization would be destroyed like this, which is why they had taken certain precautions. But, ultimately, all of that had collapsed.

All of the power, all of the wealth, all acquired through sin...all of that had vanished when House Disaea dispatched their agent, the one whose presence guarantees victory.

"It's absurd to think that you might be the only exception, the one who will live out their life safe from harm. Even those who think they're going to continue winning for the rest of their lives harbor that fear, deep down in their hearts."

It's hard to know just how lucky she actually is as Shun speaks to her. His expression toward her, the survivor, is quietly, but clearly, animated by contempt and rage.

"...Explain to me, just what is so fun? This kingdom's laws are pretty lax... So just what's so valuable that you have to earn money by breaking the law? Is a life of debauchery that much fun?"

Having built up his frustration, he now vents it on the survivor.

"Frankly, I'm disgusted that people like that live life believing that they're big shots. Even I have a sense of shame. Causing problems for upstanding people, feeding off of them, and thinking they're clever because of it... I can't believe your sort can stand living."

He slowly corners her, as though slowly strangling her with a silk rope. Pushing her, whose family, whose subordinates, have all been killed, further into despair.

“My job is to kill your sort... But there’s no real need to make them suffer. It’s not as though I enjoy it, but... I do think it’s only showing proper respect to take my time in killing them.”

He grasps her face with both hands.



"It's not a respect you're happy to see, is it? I admit, it's not as though I lack interest. To see how they die with the tools I prepared... There's a certain logic to it, like solving a math puzzle."

Without a weapon on him, he continues to taunt the woman who has lost everything, family included.

"Well, even if I hadn't done it, someone else would have killed you all eventually, perhaps even made you suffer more. But, I'm the one who killed your husband, your son, your daughter."

Their eyes only see the other.

"Why don't you try to kill me?"

A rage, an empty, self-destructive, unreasonable, and unfair rage burns within him. The flame that burns him also begins to eat at her.

"Even the worst villains love their family, yeah? So why not try to avenge them? Why aren't you going mad with anger?"

Letting go of her face, he forces her to pick up an ashtray lying nearby.

"You should be angry, you should be trying to kill me. There's no need for trickery. If you hit me with that bludgeon, you should be able to kill me," he rages, demanding to know why she doesn't seek revenge.

"Of course, your life won't improve if you kill me. One of Disaea's people or one of your competitors will capture you. But even then, shouldn't you want to kill me?"

It appears he can't forgive that a woman who has lived a glamorous life by committing acts of evil is now cowering in front of him, afraid of death, as though she were a mere damsel.

"You know nothing good can happen for you ever again, yet you won't even express your anger. What are you? A woman who can only cower in front of the man who took everything from you?"

She had let go of the ashtray, let go of the chance for vengeance.

"H—"

"H?"

"H-Help me... I don't want to die..."

"Have you no shame? No self-respect? No principles? Is all you have a fear of death? Even a cornered rat shows more spirit. To beg for your life from someone who slaughtered your entire family... What is wrong with you?"

She has no answer to Shun's question. All she has is the desperate desire to avoid death.

"Why do you cling so much to life? In spite of having indulged yourself in a constant life of luxury, how do you explain that you've done nothing but take from other people? Despite the fact that you are so afraid of death, so desperate to live?"

Numerous footfalls can be heard as, having confirmed the job was done, House Disaea's troops enter the den.

"...H-Help me!"

"...Ashtray."

Ukyo forces the bloodied ashtray she had let go back into her hands.

"Your name, from now on, is Ashtray. Until you kill me and avenge your family, you are Ashtray. All I am doing is taking an ashtray back to my home."

Standing in irritation, he begins to walk.

"If you remain here, they'll dispose of you. If you value your life, hurry up and follow me, Ashtray."

"...Yes, sir!"

The complete master of one of the Eight Sacred Treasures, the Armor of Disaster, Pandora. House Disaea's ace, Shun Ukiyo, 'the Thinker.'

Wherever he is dispatched to work, only corpses remain when he's done.

Afterword

Thank you for picking up the second volume of “The World’s Least Interesting Master Swordsman.”

It’s thanks to you, the reader, that I’ve been able to publish this second volume of the series. I really have nothing but words of thanks to offer.

As I doubt there are those who start reading with the afterword, I will proceed with the assumption you have read the contents of this second volume. For this volume, I have had to correct a great deal of typos and add substantial new sections of text.

This comes from a desire to make sure that both people who wait for my submissions and those who are picking up the book for the first time can enjoy it.

In the newly written section, the man who has as yet barely made an appearance in the *Narou* version, House Disaea’s ace, ‘the Thinker,’ Shun Ukiyo, makes his long-awaited debut.

He’s equivalent to the ‘Three of Hearts,’ the card that, while not the most powerful, can defeat the most powerful character.

How he ended up being picked up by House Disaea, the abilities of Pandora...those mysteries are something I hope to reveal in time. At least, assuming I get the opportunity.

The thing I hope to show in this work as it progresses is not the fighting of the Japanese transferees, but of the people who live in ‘this’ world.

Suiboku, who has climbed to the top of the world through talent and dedication, is the greatest example, but none of the people in this world are necessarily inferior to their Japanese counterparts.

Of course, not all of them are conveniently brilliant, but at the same time, none of them are conveniently incompetent, either.

To be more specific, those who have received a proper education are at least properly competent and as a result will end up on the winning side. And those who haven’t, are correspondingly incompetent, and will suffer the consequences of the same.

It’s probably best to be strong and smart and lucky, but the most important thing is to have the correct perspective, and I believe that next to luck, that’s the strongest thing.

I will continue my efforts, hoping that you will all enjoy it as you empathize with my characters.

Finally, as I pray that this won’t be the final volume, I would like to offer my thanks to those whose help I rely upon each and every day.

My family and relatives who have supported me, a fledgling author.

Mr. Egawa and Mr. Kuroda from the publisher, my advisor Mr. Kondo, the illustrator of the lovely illustrations Shiso, and Appe who handles the comic adaptation.

Thank you, and I look forward to working further with you in the future.

Rokuro Akashi,

An Auspicious Day in September, 2018

Bonus Short Story

Bitterness

Wait, how did this come to this? We were only in the capital to celebrate His Brothership's accession, and yet I wound up fighting the entirety of the Crown's elite Royal Guard.

I think I somehow managed to put the situation to rest without killing anyone, but I can't imagine that this incident won't drive a wedge between House Sepaeda and the Crown. Worse, it's clearly something that could have been avoided. Why did this have to happen between people in the same kingdom?

"Well done. As a celebration of accession to the title goes, it was the perfect outcome."

"I am glad to have been of service, my lord."

However, given that His Brothership, who has taken over for His Fathership, is being unstinting in his praise, I can't very well give voice to my concerns. But is this really right? To clash with the Crown immediately after taking the title?

"House Sepaeda is a martial house, the sword of the kingdom."

"Yes."

"Then what use are we if we are weaker than the Crown?"

As though sensing my concerns, His Brothership tells me not to worry. But, really, I'm not so unflappable that I can just put aside my concerns. Honestly, it's pretty ridiculous logic on his part. Isn't this a bit like a bodyguard punching the VIP they're supposed to guard?

I mean, in terms of the question of who exactly is stronger, isn't it better to leave it ambiguous?

"Sansui... Good job winning. Don't you think, Blois?"

"Yes... I find it reassuring as his colleague."

Smiling brightly, Lady Douve is extremely pleased with my victory. I'm glad she's happy, but I don't know if this is something she should be celebrating. In fact, it's one of those things that she shouldn't really celebrate at all.

"Still... You really are powerful."

"..."

At the same time, Blois is completely creeped out. Well, I suppose I can't blame her. Not only did I take out the kingdom's greatest knight, but that I then fought and beat the Crown's entire Royal Guard, and came away without a scratch or even a hint of fatigue is, in fact, a bit creepy. To have someone see your strength and fear you... That's never going to be pleasant, but in my case, I feel a bit reassured by her revulsion.

Both His Brothership and Lady Douve are taking far too much pleasure in this. Why aren't they feeling more in the way of fear or uncertainty or doubt?

"Blois is right. Sansui, we hadn't been able to measure the true depth of your ability, but I didn't expect that even the Thunder Knight or the entire Royal Guard would be no match for you."

His Brothership seems quite pleased. But, in the worst case, I could have actually ended up dead, so I have to wonder about that. That he trusts me, or rather that he was testing me, is a bit of a scary thought.

"You're ordinarily pretty dull, but since your opponents were so flashy, it was quite fun to watch."

Nor can I take much pleasure in Lady Douve's praise. I mean, I'm pretty sure she's not actually praising me. If anything, she's just enjoying the frustration of the royals.

"In particular, everyone was just shocked when you cut that lightning."

"I appreciate the praise, but that is an exaggeration. I cannot slash lightning, my lady."

Even if it looked like I slashed the lightning, that wasn't what happened. That's just an illusion.

"I simply moved in front of the Grand Commander before the lightning spell fired, and began swinging my blade before the Grand Commander noticed, and hit his head right as the spell triggered."

"If anything, that sounds even more impressive..."

Hearing my explanation, Blois says something off the mark. Surely, everyone can agree that actually slashing lightning is more impressive.

"It's one thing to do that to an average soldier, but no doubt you are the only one capable of doing that to the Grand Commander of the Royal Guard."

"As I keep saying, my Master is far beyond me in skill. Indeed, I'm quite sure my Master could slash lightning, if he so desired."

"I always have to wonder when he comes up, but just what is your master? Is there truly a swordsman that much stronger than you?"

My colleague Blois doubts the existence of my Master, Suiboku. For that matter, both His Brothership and Lady Douve both seem to be skeptical of a superior swordsman's existence.

However, since Master Suiboku is, in fact, much stronger than I am, I take time to correct this misconception each time it comes up. I don't need them to believe me, but saying my Master is superior to me is something I need to do for my own sake.

"Putting aside your Master... So, what did you think about the Crown's elite?"

"It may sound sarcastic, but they were powerful enemies."

Coming away without so much as a ruffled hair after facing a hundred opponents... Whatever such a man says afterward may inevitably come off as sarcasm, but I give my sincere opinion anyway. Yes, they were strong. They were the greatest opponents I've faced so far.

"In particular, the Thunder Knight, the Grand Commander of the Royal Guard... He was an opponent I would have preferred not to face."

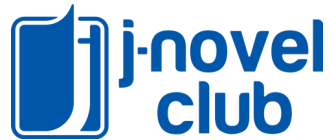
I give my honest thoughts to Lady Douve and the others. Yes, it's clear that I have, in fact rather than theory, trampled on the honor of the Royal Guard. Sepaeda's reputation rose, while the Crown's fell.

The fact I'm actually a five-hundred-year-old immortal means nothing. I don't want to think about what sort of conclusions the Royal Guard and their commander are reaching.

"...Yes, it was an opponent I would have preferred not to face."

Several days later, it was formally announced that the Grand Commander, upon awakening, had resigned his post. He cited his age as a reason, but none of the nobles who witnessed that fight could believe that.

It was a bitter fight. At least, for me.



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The World's Least Interesting Master Swordsman: Volume 2

by Rokurou Akashi

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